

The New Criterion

September 2000

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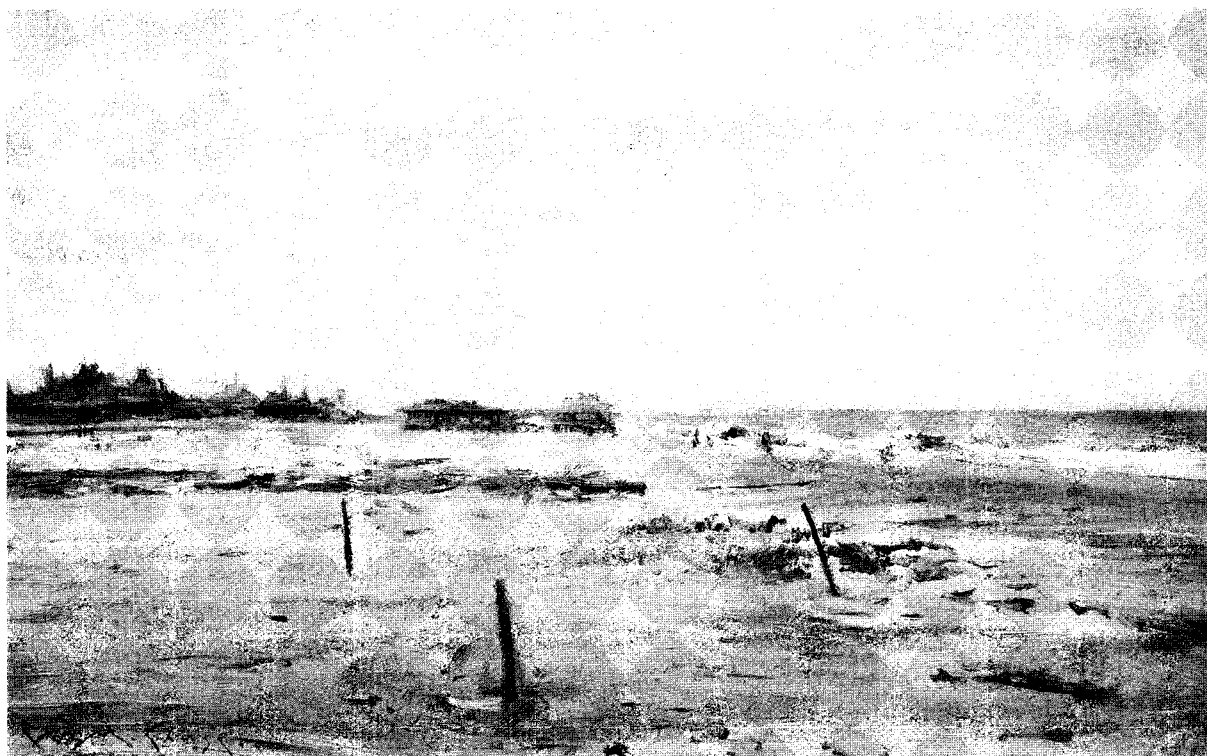
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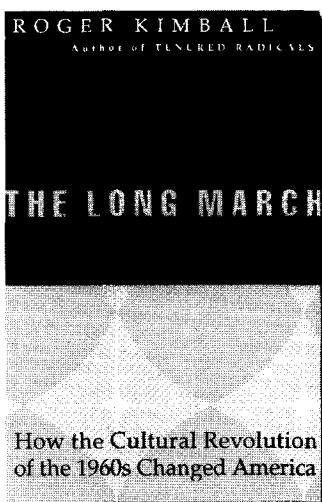
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Notes & Comments:

September 2000

We Now Know

Some myths die hard. One of the most recalcitrant in recent times has been the myth of McCarthyism—the myth that America in the late 1940s and early 1950s was in the grip of a fearsome, paranoid “witch-hunt” against supposed Communists and other alleged traitors. According to this myth, the assault was fearsome because it blighted thousands of careers and lives, and it was paranoid because it was essentially groundless. Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee ranted on about Communist spies, but really, the myth of McCarthyism maintains, there were no spies to speak of, only liberals like . . . well, like Alger Hiss.

You might think that by now liberals would have given up on this one. After all, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the subsequent opening of many Soviet archives, there is indisputable evidence—a mountain of it—for what had long been alleged by cold warriors. The liberal line had always been that the American Communist Party was basically an expression of home-grown radical sentiment; in fact, it had from the beginning been a tool of Moscow; moreover, many of the radical “martyrs” of the period were hard-core Stalinists and KGB operatives. This is not speculation: it is

hard and fast historical fact. As the historian John Gaddis put it in the title of his 1997 history of the Cold War: *We Now Know*.

Or so we would have thought. But what is evidence in the face of self-righteous political animus? Not much, if Arthur Miller’s breathtaking expostulation about the origins of his play *The Crucible* is any guide. Entitled “Are You Now or Were You Ever . . . ?,” Mr. Miller’s latest exercise in self-congratulation appeared in—it is almost too good to be true, but is *is* true—*The Guardian*, the most predictable left-wing “quality” paper in London. There had, of course, long been speculation that the activities of Sen. McCarthy and HUAC had been the chief inspiration for *The Crucible*; no one, we think, will accuse Mr. Miller of having been overly subtle in his deployment of symbolism. But he has now for the first time cleared up any remaining doubts: “It would probably never have occurred to me to write a play about the Salem witch trials of 1692 had I not seen some astonishing correspondences with that calamity in the America of the late 40s and early 50s. . . . I refer to the anti-communist rage that threatened to reach hysterical proportions and sometimes did.”

Mr. Miller has always been a reliable source of radical-chic clichés and he does

not disappoint in this new recollection. We can well believe him when he remarks that “Practically everyone I knew stood within the conventions of the political left of centre; one or two were Communist party members, some were fellow-travellers, and most had had a brush with Marxist ideas or organisations.” But is it naïveté or something else when he goes on to declare that “I have never been able to believe in the reality of these people being actual or putative traitors any more than I could be, yet others like them were being fired from teaching or jobs in government or large corporations.” Mr. Miller is especially incredulous that any of his fellow artists could have engaged in traitorous activities: “The unwelcome truth denied by the right was that the Hollywood writers accused of subversion were not a menace to the country, or even bearers of meaningful change. They wrote not propaganda but entertainment, some of it of a mildly liberal cast, but most of it mindless, or when it was political, as with Preston Sturges or Frank Capra, entirely and exuberantly un-Marxist.”

Really? Mr. Miller concludes his piece by speaking of the black singer Paul Robeson, whose “declaration of faith in socialism as a cure for racism,” he says, “was a rocket that lit up the sky.” Robeson is widely considered a martyr of HUAC. In fact, he was a doctrinaire Stalinist who believed that only in the Soviet Union were blacks really free. At the World Peace Congress in 1949, Robeson publicly declared that American blacks would not fight for the American flag, least of all against Moscow: “It is unthinkable,” he said, that his race “would go to war on behalf of those who oppressed us for generations.” Russia he described as “a country which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind.” In the same year, like many other artists under Stalinist “discipline,” he voluntarily gave up acting and singing, explaining that “I have no time in the political struggle of today to entertain people.” Robeson received the Stalin Prize in 1953, the year of the dictator’s death, and he signed a eulogy that con-

tained the benediction “Glory to Stalin. Forever will his name be honored and beloved in all lands.”

The most devastating anatomy that we have seen of Mr. Miller’s latest pacan to “ideals of socialism” is Ronald Radosh’s on-line column in *Frontpage Magazine* (www.frontpagemag.com). Mr. Radosh begins by noting that, contrary to Mr. Miller’s assertions,

scores of anti-Communist liberals and defenders of civil liberties rallied around the right of Communists and Socialists to be heard, although they despised their propaganda. Without “McCarthyism,” the left-wing would actually have had less of a shield to hide behind: the attacks on their links to the Soviet Union allowed them to claim that anyone accused—such as Alger Hiss—was completely innocent, even when in fact they were guilty.

Quoting from an article by the espionage expert Thomas Powers that appeared in *The New York Review of Books* last May, Mr. Radosh proceeds to shred Mr. Miller’s entire account of the relation between the Soviet-controlled Communist threat and the anti-Communist crusade. Soviet spies, Powers wrote in his article,

were of the left generally, they supported liberal causes, they defended the Soviet Union in all circumstances, they were often secret members of the Communist Party, they were uniformly suspicious of American initiatives throughout the world, they could be contemptuous of American democracy, society and culture, and above all, their offenses were often minimized or explained away by apologists who felt that no man should be called traitor who did what he did for the cause of humanity.

If even *The New York Review* has faced up to the historical evidence about the threat of Communist propaganda and espionage in the late 1940s and 1950s, where does that

leave Mr. Miller? As Mr. Radosh observes, "The importance of Powers' essay is that it reveals the truths which generations of liberals have refused to acknowledge; that the crisis which propelled Miller to write *The Crucible* was caused 'not only by the discovery of spies but by the denial of spies.' The Soviet Union was in fact running major spy networks, infiltrating the United States government, and the implications of this operation were not faced squarely by the United States until late in the game." To deal with the era as a "witch-hunt," as Mr. Miller does, is to ignore a crucial fact. "One cannot," Mr. Radosh concludes, "write about McCarthyism without first admitting that there were spies; the spies claimed idealism as a defense."

Mr. Miller refers to "Harry Bridges, the idol of west coast longshoremen" as an "un-admitted communist" who he claims was unfairly persecuted. But recent research has shown that Bridges was in fact not only a member of the Communist Party but also "secretly a member of its Central Committee." Mr. Miller writes that "it is impossible to convey properly the fears that marked that period. Nobody was shot, to be sure, although some were going to jail, where at least one, William Remington, was murdered by an inmate hoping to shorten his sentence by having killed a communist." It is true that Remington was murdered in jail. But, Mr. Radosh points out, Remington was a spy who met secretly with Communist operatives and "willingly handed over classified War Production Board material pertaining to aircraft production."

Mr. Miller writes that "The heart of the darkness was the belief that a massive, profoundly organised conspiracy was in place and carried forward mainly by a concealed phalanx of intellectuals, including labour activists, teachers, professionals, sworn to undermine the American government." But what he describes as a paranoid fantasy we now know to be the historical truth.

The real witch hunt

Speaking of witch-hunts, we cannot forbear to share with our readers a document sent to us by a friend from Naperville, Illinois, a suburb west of Chicago. Entitled "Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Childrens Books for Racism and Sexism," this preposterous little guide, originally devised by the Illinois School Library Media Conference in 1997, was distributed for the guidance of teachers in Naperville as part of their new "Diversity Plan." Among other things, "Ten Quick Ways" advises readers to "Check the Illustrations" of children's books for stereotypes and tokenism, to "Check the Story Line": "Is 'making it' in the dominant white society projected as the only ideal? The standard for success?" (As opposed to what, becoming a welfare mother or crack addict?) "Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence? Could the story be told if the sex roles were reversed?" Hmm, could it? What if Briseas were pouting in her tent because Andromache took Achilles for herself? Readers are further admonished to "Watch for Loaded Words"—for example, "savage," "primitive," "lazy," and "backward." Finally, we are told to "Look for the copyright date" because "Nonsexist books, with rare exceptions, were not published before 1973."

So, farewell to Aesop's fables (how unfair to suggest that the grasshopper might have been lazy!), farewell to *Huckleberry Finn*, to *Othello* (talk about "tokenism"!), to *Robinson Crusoe* (my man Friday, indeed), farewell to Grimm's fairy tales, to *Peter Pan*, to *Pride and Prejudice*, to the stories of Rudyard Kipling. Farewell, in short, to imaginative literature from the world over and hello to the PC police who speak everywhere about "diversity" but whose actions assure the promulgation of a stultifying intellectual conformity. Here is a real witch-hunt in progress. A pity, isn't it, that left-wing crusaders like Arthur Miller will not be picking up their pens to expose it?

The difficulty with Hegel

by Roger Kimball

Philosophy need not trouble itself about ordinary ideas.

—G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*

He described what he knew best or had heard most, and felt he had described the universe.

—George Santayana, on Hegel

Philosophers are hardly ever cynical manipulators of their readers' minds. They do not produce delusions in others, without first being subject to them themselves.

—David Stove, "Idealism: a Victorian Horror-story (Part One)"

Hegel, Bertrand Russell observed, is "the hardest to understand of the great philosophers." Hegel would not have liked very much that Russell had to say about his philosophy in *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945). Russell's exposition is a classic in the library of philosophical demolition, much despised by Hegel's admirers for its vulgar insistence on common sense. (Best line: that Hegel's philosophy "illustrates an important truth, namely, that the worse your logic, the more interesting the consequences to which it gives rise.") But I am not at all sure that Hegel would have disagreed with Russell's comment about the difficulty of understanding him. He knew he was difficult. He was always going on about the "labor of the negative," the superficiality of mere common sense, and the long, "strenuous effort" that genuinely

"scientific" (i.e., Hegelian) philosophy required. It is even said that on his deathbed Hegel declared that there was only one man who had understood him—and he had misunderstood him.

I first came across that *mot* in Søren Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), another anti-Hegelian salvo, quite different from Russell's. Neither Kierkegaard nor his editors supply a source for the observation, and Terry Pinkard, in his new biography of Hegel,¹ sniffily describes it as an "apocryphal story," "emblematic of the anti-Hegelian reaction that quickly set in" after the philosopher's death in 1831.

I was sorry to learn that. Like many people who have soldiered through a fair number of Hegel's books, I was both awed and depressed by their glittering opacity. With the possible exception of Heidegger, Hegel is far and away the most difficult "great philosopher" I have ever studied. There was much that I did not understand. I secretly suspected that no one—not even my teachers—*really* understood him, and it was nice to have that prejudice supported from the master's own lips.

Is it worth the effort? I mean, you spend a hundred hours poring over *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807)—widely considered to be Hegel's masterpiece—and what do you have to show for it? The book is sup-

¹ *Hegel: A Biography*, by Terry Pinkard; Cambridge University Press, 780 pages, \$39.95.

posed to take you from the naïve, “immediate” (*unmittelbar*, a favorite Hegelian term of contempt) position of “sense certainty” to Absolute Knowledge, “or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit.”² That sounds pretty good, especially when you are, say, eighteen and are busy soaking up ideas guaranteed to mystify and alarm your parents. But what do you suppose it means? Mr. Pinkard notes that at Jena in the early 1800s, “Hegel seemed to inspire two kinds of reaction: he was either highly admired and even idolized, or he was disparaged.” In fact, Hegel’s work has always inspired these opposite reactions, throughout his lifetime and afterwards. Mr. Pinkard, who teaches philosophy at Georgetown University and who has written several other books about Hegel, is firmly in the admirers’ camp. I am not.

What Mr. Pinkard has given us with his new book on Hegel is partly an intellectual biography, partly an outline of Hegel’s work. Recognizing that some of his readers will be more interested in Hegel’s life than in detailed discussions of his ideas (and vice versa), he has done his best to segregate the story of Hegel’s life and intellectual formation from the book reports. He corrects some misconceptions. For example, I had

always thought that Hegel died of cholera when an epidemic of that disease swept through Berlin in 1831. Not so, says Mr. Pinkard. What Hegel really died of was “most likely . . . some kind of upper gastrointestinal disease.” Good to know that. And like almost every sympathetic commentator on Hegel I have read, Mr. Pinkard sternly points out that the one thing everyone remembers about Hegel’s philosophy—that it says reality develops according to a process of “thesis/antithesis/synthesis”—is actually nowhere to be found in Hegel’s writings. It was in fact a shorthand devised by a “deservedly obscure” professor called Heinrich Moritz Chalybäus. The popularity—could it be the clarity?—of that formula seems to incense Hegelians. Mr. Pinkard argues that it “misrepresents the structure of Hegel’s thought,” though I have to say that readers who encounter Hegel’s description of “the movement” in which thought “becomes estranged and then returns to itself from estrangement, and is only then presented in its actuality and truth” might be forgiven for making the same mistake.

Mr. Pinkard does an adequate job—not more than that, I’d say. He is clearly in command of the material, biographical as well as philosophical and historical; he has all the right quotations from Kant and Fichte, Hegel’s primary philosophical inspirations; he provides generally astute summaries of contemporary events and controversies; nevertheless his presentation is plodding and curiously repetitious. How many times, for example, do we need to be reminded that Hegel was excessively fond of wine—he had good taste in claret, which is something—and of playing cards? How often do we need to be told that he had the nickname “old man” when he was at school? Mr. Pinkard also has an unfortunate fondness for the word “alienation,” an Hegelian-Marxoid tic. When the young Hegel spends Wednesdays and Saturdays at the library instead of at home, it is a sign of the “alienation he felt as a teenager”—that sort of thing.

2 I suspect that at least part of the success of Hegel’s book was due to its title, which combines the edifying (*Geist*, spirit) with the *recherché* (phenomenology). What exactly is a *phenomenology* of spirit? The term “Phänomenologie” was coined by the eighteenth-century German philosopher J. H. Lambert, who used it to mean the study of the illusory aspects of experience. As Mr. Pinkard points out, Hegel took the term from Kant, who with his distinction between “phenomena” (stuff we experience) and “noumena” (stuff we cannot experience), gave it a new twist. Just as biology is the “logos” or study of life (“bios”), so “phenomenology” is the logos or study of “appearances” (from the Greek *phenomena*, “things that appear”). Hegel’s “phenomenology of spirit,” then, attempts to describe the unfolding appearances of self-consciousness from its dawn to its full maturity.

One problem for Mr. Pinkard is that Hegel's life was really not eventful enough to support a graceful biography of nearly eight-hundred pages. Born in Stuttgart in 1770 (the same year as Beethoven, Wordsworth, and his friend Hölderlin), Hegel came of age in the period of high Romanticism. His philosophy, which everywhere betrays a hankering after the infinite, is very much an expression of Romanticism, a fact that Mr. Pinkard both registers and manages to discount. In his early years, Hegel was a model student. But by the time he got to the theological institute at Tübingen in 1788 (where he roomed with Hölderlin and, beginning in 1790, with Schelling), Hegel had begun to chafe under the yoke of established authority and hidebound pedagogy. Bertrand Russell remarked that Hegel was attracted to mysticism when young and that his mature philosophy was "an intellectualizing of what had first appeared to him as mystic insight." If you look at Hegel's philosophy, that seems plausible, though Mr. Pinkard gives no evidence for "mystic insight" in the young Hegel. What is true, I think, is that in Hegel we see a theological student who became disenchanted with theology but could not see his way clear to dispensing with the aura of profundity that theology offered. The result was the attenuated theology of Hegelian idealism, in which the Absolute stands in for God.

Hegel lived in tumultuous times. The French Revolution was one contemporary "world-historical" event that fired his imagination. The other was the career of Napoleon. Hegel was at Jena, teaching and finishing the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, when Napoleon came through in 1806. (Though Mr. Pinkard points out that it is not true, as Hegel suggested in a letter, that the book was completed on the eve of the Battle of Jena.) Like many Romantics, Hegel worshipped power, and in Napoleon ("this extraordinary man, whom it is impossible not to admire") he saw power incarnate. When the emperor rode through town, Hegel wrote excitedly to a friend that he had seen "the world-soul . . . astride a horse."

But what did Hegel *do*? He was a private tutor, headmaster at a high school, briefly the editor of a provincial newspaper, and for most of his career a university professor: at Heidelberg from 1816 to 1818, and then at Berlin until his death. Although he became a great celebrity at Berlin, Hegel's lecturing style was not universally admired: students not susceptible to his spell, Mr. Pinkard tells us, complained that he began every third sentence with "therefore." One note of drama came in 1807 when Hegel fathered an illegitimate child, named Ludwig, with his landlady. Mr. Pinkard notes that after Hegel was married (in 1811) and had two other sons, he arranged for Ludwig to live with his family. It ended badly. Ludwig wished to study medicine, but Hegel refused to pay for his education. (In general, it seems that he treated Ludwig as a second-class citizen.) Ludwig broke with the family around 1826, commenting that "I always lived in fear but never in love of my parents." Mr. Pinkard deals fairly with the story of Ludwig in his text but, curiously, there is no sign of the child in the index, either in his own right or as an episode in Hegel's life. Under "Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich," we find entries for everything from "beer" to "napping on sofa," but nothing under "illegitimate child" or "Ludwig." A very Hegelian sense of priorities.

The tone and embonpoint of Mr. Pinkard's book suggest that with Hegel we are dealing with a figure of the first importance. It is a common feeling. Another Hegel commentator, J. N. Findlay, spoke for many when he said that Hegel was, "without doubt, the Aristotle of our post-Renaissance world." (Findlay also said that Hegel's personality was "characterized by an almost English sobriety and good sense," a remark that surely casts suspicion on *his* good sense.) For my own part, I believe that when you finish working your way through Hegel what you have are two things: a handful of scattered insights about philosophy, art, and society; and acquaintance with—often contamination by—one of the

most powerfully obfuscating philosophical methodologies ever devised. I am perfectly happy to acknowledge that Hegel was a genius. But so what? As the English writer Walter Bagehot observed in another context, “In the faculty of writing nonsense, stupidity is no match for genius.”

Hegel wrote a great deal of nonsense. Yet he did not do it on purpose. Arthur Schopenhauer, one of Hegel’s bitterest enemies, was right to complain about “the stupefying influence of Hegel’s sham wisdom.” (No one under the age of forty, he thought, should read Hegel: the danger of intellectual corruption was too great.) But I believe that Schopenhauer was wrong to attribute mystifying motives to Hegel. He may have been, as Schopenhauer also said, a “charlatan,” but Hegel was a sincere charlatan. He said a lot of loopy things. He believed them all.

Kierkegaard saw something essential about Hegel when he noted that he and his philosophy “constitute an essay in the comical.” Hegel, Kierkegaard said, was like a man who had built a palace but lived in the guard house. His elaborate “System” of philosophy promised to chart the necessary development not only of consciousness but also of world history and even of nature—indeed, for Hegel, there were no hard and fast distinctions to be drawn among these realms. On the first page of his preface, Mr. Pinkard plaintively asks how it is that Hegel “came to be so badly misunderstood.” That is one question I think I can help him answer. Item: “A rational consideration of Nature,” Hegel wrote in his *Philosophy of Nature*,

must consider how Nature is in its own self this process of becoming Spirit, of subsuming its otherness—and how the Idea is present in each grade or level of Nature itself: estranged from the Idea, Nature is only the corpse of the Understanding. Nature is, however, only implicitly the Idea, and Schelling therefore called her a petrified intelligence . . . ; but God does not remain petrified and dead; the very stones cry out and raise themselves to Spirit.

Which leaves us—where? Between a rock and a hard place, anyway. All but Hegel’s most abject admirers are (at least secretly) embarrassed by his philosophy of nature. It takes a strong man to read, for example, that “the celestial bodies only *appear* to be independent of each other” without blanching. A peek into that part of Hegel’s oeuvre is the quickest way to highlight Kierkegaard’s point: the discrepancy between pretension and achievement is like Falstaff’s dishonesty: “gross as a mountain, open, palpable.” The formidable difficulty of Hegel’s writings might make it seem that one must be extensively trained in philosophy to answer him effectively. But this, Kierkegaard wrote, “is by no means the case. All that is needed is sound common sense, a fund of humor, and a little Greek ataraxy [tranquillity].” Of course, it is not without irony that those homely things—common sense, humor, and tranquillity—may be in even shorter supply these days than the sort of dialectical prowess that playing with Hegel’s philosophy requires.

The real issue for Kierkegaard was the place of the individual in this grand chronicle purporting to recapitulate—nay, to *be*—Spirit’s self-unfolding. (There is a worrisome ambiguity running through all of Hegel’s work: does he believe that his philosophy is *reporting* on its subject matter—logic, world history, self-consciousness, whatever—or does he think his philosophy somehow *is* its subject matter?) The problem is that the individual seems to get lost in the process. Kierkegaard saw the unintended comedy of a system picturing the development of self-consciousness in which the self in any recognizable form is shuffled off rather early. Yes, Hegel constantly assures us that each “stage” or “moment” of development is simultaneously *cancelled* and yet *preserved* as Spirit progresses. This after all is the famous dialectical process whereby each level of development is said to contain its opposite and is *aufgehoben*. There is, I am happy to say, no English equivalent for that participle. It is usually translated as “sub-

lated.”³ What this Hegelian philosopher’s stone means is that you can eat your contradiction and have it too. “The essence of each thing,” Hegel wrote in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, “lies in determination, in what is the opposite of itself.” Nice work, if you can get it. Hegel’s dialectic is a universal cognitive solvent; it licenses epistemological anarchy. If the essence of X is not-X, what then? The philosopher Leszek Kolakowski underscored the sober truth of the matter: “We must finally conclude that in the Hegelian system humanity becomes what it is, or achieves unity with itself, only by ceasing to be humanity.”

So why read Hegel? For one thing, he has startling flashes of insight—about the nature of modernity, the relationship between the state and civil society, the self-enchantments of freedom. Hegel is deep. He is also muddy. His work, the philosopher Roger Scruton observed, is “like a beautiful oasis around a treacherous pool of nonsense, and nowhere beneath the foliage is the ground really firm.” It may be worth visiting, but both the going and the getting back are treacherous. Many never return.

A second reason to read Hegel has to do with that treacherousness. Just as doctors learn a lot about health by studying diseases, so we can learn a lot about philosophical health by studying Hegel. As Russell noted, Hegel “epitomized better than anyone a certain kind of philosophy.” It wasn’t, Russell thought, a good kind of philosophy—he believed that “almost all of Hegel’s doctrines are false”—but it vividly illustrated the mental consequences of looking at the world in the peculiar way that Hegel’s philosophy teaches us to.

A third reason to read Hegel is his influence, which everybody—friend as well as

foe—admits was enormous. “No philosopher since 1800,” Walter Kaufmann wrote in his 1965 appreciation of Hegel, “has had more influence.” That influence took several different directions, of which I will mention three. In the first place, Hegel’s writings, especially the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right* (1820), were a definitive influence on the philosophy of Karl Marx and, through him, on Lenin and Stalin and on Marxism in general. It is true that Marx devoted many pages to criticizing Hegel’s philosophy. But he firmly embraced Hegel’s view of history as a realm of ineluctable dialectical progress—progress, that is to say, which is *necessary*, i.e., inevitable, and which proceeds by continuous negation. As the philosopher Louis Dupré put it, Marx accepted the method of Hegel’s philosophy while discarding its content. One often hears that Marx attempted to “stand Hegel on his head.” What Marx actually said (in *Capital*) was that Hegel’s idealism left his dialectic “standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.”

Just how “rational” Marx’s appropriation of Hegel turned out to be, we now know. The murderous legacy of Marxism cannot be laid at Hegel’s door—except, perhaps, insofar as Hegel’s philosophy unfits the mind for exercising serious criticism. Marx never tired of excoriating Hegel for his “mystification.” Quite right, too. But Marx took on board a particularly noxious piece of mystification when he swallowed Hegel’s dialectic. As George Santayana noted in *Egotism in German Philosophy* (1916; rev. ed. 1939), implicit in Hegel’s dialectic is a monstrous piece of “egotism” that presupposes the preposterous effort of “making things conform to words, not words to things.”

Hegel’s admirers hate that sort of criticism. It seems downright philistine to point out that the idea of one thing “containing” (or “positing,” as Hegel liked to say) its opposite is really just a piece of verbal legerdemain. That is exactly the sort of thing your man in the street, someone who hadn’t

3 The word is the gift of a clever translator who remembered that *sublatum* was the perfect passive participle of the Latin verb *tollo*, which means both “to raise up” or “preserve” and “to take away,” “remove,” “destroy.” A very Hegelian sort of word, *tollo*.

had the benefit of reading Hegel, would say. But then Hegel has always been especially popular among people whose entire livelihood is bound up with verbal legerdemain—I mean academic professors of philosophy. Whatever else can be said about Hegel, he is the ideal professor's philosopher. He has been extremely helpful in keeping the mills of academic industry grinding away. Not only does the inherent difficulty of his books guarantee a virtually endless stream of work—Hegel's books cry out for academic commentary, the more the better—but also his view of the universe was calculated to be deeply gratifying to academic philosophers. After all, his philosophy puts them and their profession at the very apex of creation. Artists have an intuitive grasp of the Absolute, Hegel thought; in religion, one is “*implicitly* reconciled with the divine Being”; but it is only with philosophy that Spirit achieves “the supreme freedom and assurance of its self-knowledge.” Convenient, that, if you happen to be a professor of philosophy.

Finally, Hegel has been immensely influential on the development of post-Kantian idealism. What is idealism? It is the contention that thought makes or (better, because more portentous) “constitutes” reality. (Mr. Pinkard speaks of Hegel's “supposedly ‘idealist’” philosophy, but that is much too modest: Hegel's was the real thing.) Idealism exercises a variety of attractions. For one thing, it is deeply flattering to its proponents, for it suggests that reality is in some obscure way dependent on them. (Hence Santayana's charge of “egotism,” which he defined as “subjectivity in thought and willfulness in morals.”) Idealism also, as the philosopher David Stove pointed out, offers a steady diet of religious consolation while simultaneously pretending to take it away. The basic procedure is quite simple. As Stove observed in his essay “Idealism: a Victorian Horror-story (Part One),”

In every idealist manual after Kant, the first lesson is the same: *kick Berkeley*. This is sure to

start things off on the best possible footing, by engaging your readers' common sense on your side. This way, you cut off their retreat, and you can then torment them at your leisure, about how, although the universe is *of course* thought, it is not, indeed, *your* thought, or my thought, or even everybody's thought. It is objective, or public, or Absolute, Thought.

Hegel was a supreme master at this sort of thing. In the long preface to the *Phenomenology*, for example, he early on tells his readers that “philosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying”: “What I have set myself to do is to help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title ‘love of knowing’ and be *actual* knowing.”

Fair enough, you say. “Science,” “*actual* knowing”: it all sounds eminently worthwhile. Thank God he is not some crazy Berkeleyan who thinks that “to be is to be perceived” or whatever. But exactly what does Hegel mean by “science,” by “*actual* knowing”? Perhaps the following passages will clear things up. The first is from the preface to the *Phenomenology*, the second from its last chapter:

The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, *viz.* to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself. Though it may seem contradictory that the Absolute should be conceived essentially as a result, it needs little pondering to set this show of contradiction in its true light. The beginning, the principle, or the Absolute, as at first immediately enunciated, is only the universal.

Spirit . . . has shown itself to us to be neither merely the withdrawing of self-consciousness into its pure inwardness, nor the mere submergence of self-consciousness into substance, and the non-being of its difference; but Spirit is *this movement* of the Self which empties it-

self of itself and sinks itself into its substance, and also, as Subject, has gone out of that substance into itself, making the substance into an object and a content at the same time as it cancels this difference between objectivity and content. . . . Spirit, therefore, having won the Notion, displays its existence and movement in this ether of its life and is *Science*.

Everywhere in Hegel there is an aroma of religiosity—religion so to speak “sublated” into the frightful patois of philosophical idealism. In the introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel assures readers in one breath that of course “the universal spirit or world spirit is not the same thing as God. It is the rationality of spirit in its world existence. Its movement is that it makes itself what it is, i.e., what its concept is.” Thanks for that clarification. But in the same work he tells us that philosophy has demonstrated that “Reason . . . is both substance and infinite power, in itself the infinite material of all natural and spiritual life as well as the *infinite form*, the actualization of itself as content. . . . the True, the Eternal, the Absolute Power and that it and nothing but it, its glory and majesty, manifests itself in the world.” Amen.

Hegel is also an acknowledged expert at another maneuver, the art of the philosophical thunderclap, what Stove describes (in the second part of his essay on idealism) as “reasoning from a sudden and violent solecism.”

Say or imply, for example, that in English “value” means the same as “individuality.” You can be miles down the track of your argument before they get their breath back.

This method is not only physiologically but ethologically sound. Of course it should never be used *first*. You need first to earn the respect of your readers, by some good reasoning, penetrating observations, or the like: *then* apply the violent solecism. Tell them, for example, that when we say of something that it is a prime number, we mean that it was born out of wedlock. You *cannot* go wrong this

way. Decent philosophers will be so disconcerted by this, that they will never do the one thing they should do: simply say, “That is NOT what ‘prime number’ means!” Instead, they will *always* begin . . . [by] casting about for an *excuse* for someone’s saying what you said, or a half-excuse, or a one-eighth excuse; nor is there any danger that they will search in vain.

Hegel is full of philosophical thunderclaps. It is difficult for most of us not to be discommoded when we read, in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (1812–1816), that “logic must certainly be said to be the supernatural element which permeates every relationship of man to nature.” But when we get to his discussion of the syllogism and read that “not only is the syllogism rational, but *everything rational is a syllogism*,” the only healthy response is panic.

It is probably unfair to pick on Hegel’s *Logic*. The book really has very little to do with the discipline of the same name. Let us turn instead to one of the most profound and widely admired passages in Hegel, the celebrated “master/slave dialectic” in the *Phenomenology*. This section has made a deep impression on thinkers from Marx to Francis Fukuyama. It describes the way that we come to recognize and deal with the fact of other people, other self-consciousnesses. According to Hegel, self-consciousness exists “only in being acknowledged.” Like Rodney Dangerfield, it is not complete in itself but demands the respect, the recognition of the other. This, Hegel says, leads to a struggle for recognition, a contest that quickly escalates to a life-or-death struggle:

They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the *immediate* form in which it appears, not the submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing moment, that it is

only pure *being-for-self*. . . . Similarly, just as each stakes his own life, so each must seek the other's death, for it values the other no more than itself.

Gee. Does this sound like anyone you know or have ever heard of—excluding, that is, current or potential guests of your local penal establishment? I know, I know: that is a terribly vulgar question. After all, Hegel is not talking about you or me; he is talking about the necessary unfolding of self-consciousness as it struggles into a recognition of its own freedom. If you find *that* convincing, then you have the makings of a true Hegelian.

Of course, the master/slave dialectic is Hegel at his most dialectically nimble. It might be easier to start, as he does, with simple sense certainty. At the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel tries to get us to unsettle some of our simplest, most taken-for-granted ideas about what counts as knowledge.

To the question: “What is Now?,” let us answer, e.g., “Now is Night.” In order to test the truth of this sense-certainty a simple experiment will suffice. We write down this truth. . . . If *now, this noon*, we look again at the written truth we shall have to say that it has become stale.

The Now that is Night is *preserved*, i.e., it is treated as what it professes to be, as something that *is*; but it proves itself to be, on the contrary, something that is *not*. . . . This self-preserving Now is, therefore, not immediate but mediated; for it is determined as a permanent and self-preserving Now *through* the fact that something else, *viz.*, Day and Night, is *not*.

What should we think of this argument? Badly, anyway. It threatens to destabilize the meaning of some perfectly good words by, so to speak, falsely existentializing them. If at noontime someone said to Hegel, “George, bring me that book now,” and he waited until night to do it because, after all, that was when he had inscribed the word

“now” on a piece of paper, we wouldn’t think him clever. Part of learning language is learning the limits of language: grasping what it cannot tell us as well as what it can. On my desk at the moment is *Big and Little: A Book of Opposites* by Richard Scarry, a very different sort of philosopher from Hegel. It recounts in vivid detail the doings of Hilda the hippo, Squeaky the mouse, and many others. Our son, *actat*. two, has absorbed the difference between big and little, up and down, now and then, this and that without once positing the negative or mediating the immediate. I asked him about what Hegel said and he just laughed. Whom would you trust?

Almost everyone who reads very far into Hegel is struck by his famous observation in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right* that “The rational is the actual and the actual is the rational.” Hegel’s sympathetic commentators keep telling us not to worry, that although it might seem more or less equivalent to a cynical defense of the status quo (“Whatever is, is right”), really, in its *true determination*, it doesn’t mean that. But how can you tell? Hegel presents his system as the very incarnation of freedom. But, as Russell noted, what Hegel describes is “a very superfine brand of freedom. It does not mean that you will be able to keep out of a concentration camp. It does not imply democracy, or a free press.” Why should it? If the “essence of each thing lies . . . in what is the opposite of itself,” then anything goes. In *The Science of Logic*, Hegel remarks in passing on the advantages of German as a language for philosophy. “Some of its words,” he observes, “even possess the further peculiarity of having not only different but opposite meanings so that one cannot fail to recognize a speculative spirit of the language in them.” That “speculative spirit” is at the very center of Hegel’s philosophy. It implies a kind of verbal intoxication in which reality is subordinated to unanchored cogitation. At one point in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel defines “the True” as “the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk.” He wasn’t kidding.

Clement Greenberg

by *Tim Hilton*

Most of us can remember, or imagine, the occasions when one took a hasty or otherwise unsatisfactory essay to a demanding tutor. I did not have too much trouble of this sort at Balliol, and at the Courtauld Institute of Art, where I was a postgraduate student in the mid-1960s, a number of people were kind enough to say that they thought there was some promise in my writing. I was privileged to gain the friendship of my supervisor, the late Michael Kitson, who in later years helped me to find my way to St. Antony's. Michael Kitson was almost by nature an art historian, and he was devoted to a discipline that has little recognition in Oxford.

Michael was a shrewd and often challenging man, despite the quiet demeanor that he had inherited from his father, a scholarly East Anglian vicar. "Tim, do you think that Sir Anthony is essentially an architectural historian, as some people say? Have you looked at his Poussin book recently?" or "Tim, I think you have forgotten when Claude died." "Not at all," I replied, with all the confidence of my twenty-three years of life. "It was in 1682 and his last recorded painting is that big canvas in the Ashmolean. I think it is a totally autograph

work. It must have been cleaned quite recently, if you look at those perfect grays and greenish blues. Have you talked to its restorer. . . ?"

You will see that I was a competent lad, at least in conversation. I used to talk for hours with Michael Kitson, in his study at the Courtauld Institute or in the public houses of its area, which was just north of Oxford Street. But now I go back to the problem of taking essays to my real subject, a tutor of ferocious kindness, or dismissiveness, Clement Greenberg. Uncle Clem was wary of the Courtauld, and I think never passed through its doors. Many members of the Courtauld teaching body, I know for a fact, were terrified of him. So a visit to our little academic community might not have been a success. Clem would have found more kindred spirits in the Warburg Institute, whose parent language is German rather than French, and where no undergraduates are taught. He disliked universities. There were many alarming aspects of Clem's attitude to education. I found out what they were when, for some years, he required me to present myself, with my recent writings and thoughts on culture and taste, at his temporary London headquarters, which was usually the bar of the Dorchester Hotel.

I was always there first, being a respectful student. Our hour of rendezvous was at eleven in the morning, when the bar opened. Clem would come down from his

¹ This essay is a chapter from the book *Telling Lives*, edited by Alistair Horne and published by Macmillan Publishers Ltd, UK. Copyright © 2000 by Tim Hilton. The book can be purchased directly from the publisher (tel. 011 44 16 2483 7000) for £20.

suite and immediately energize the Dorchester staff. "A triple vodka on the rocks! Not too many rocks! And the same for this Limey pansy!"

Many of us who loved him thought that the only topic on which Clem could possibly be uninteresting was the relative values of different brands of vodka. He would discuss vodka with the Dorchester barmen, or indeed with anyone who happened to be passing. The names of these strangers would be entered in a little book he carried, a part of his still unpublished diaries. Like many people who seek purity in art, Clem much preferred drinking to eating. In the twenty-five years of our rocky friendship, I do not think I once saw him eat. The last time we met, in New York, we thought for a second or two about going somewhere for dinner, but never got ourselves off the sofas.

His apartment, I sometimes thought, was the fitting theater for Clem's despair. In some ways it resembled the bar of the Dorchester Hotel. The carpets were deep, the furniture expensive but not good enough. ("Not good enough" was a phrase often on Clem's noticeably sensuous lips, which he used to lick when he saw a painting he liked.) From the windows, one looked out over Central Park. As in the Dorchester, someone would come round every five minutes to bring more vodka and empty the ashtrays. On Central Park West this was Clem himself. He was a very tidy person.

There were paintings by Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, Alfred Wallis, Kenneth Noland, and Friedel Dzubas on the walls, and many other paintings too. On a table were some pre-Columbian sculptures. An exceptionally good small sculpture by Anthony Caro lay among the tufts of the carpet, like a fallen bird. Greenberg would keep reciting poetry to me, dozens of lines that he knew by heart. "Who is that, kid?" I could never say. It was Browning, who, as anyone may discover, sounds either Jacobean or modern when read aloud (especially by a man with a Brooklyn-Jewish accent). He laughed at having beaten me, the young English writer.

I jestingly said to Clem one day that, with

his attention to ashtrays, his passion for differentiating between different styles of vodka, his (sometimes) courteous manner and his interest in remembering strangers' names, he might become a good barman, since it was obvious that no one wished to read his art criticism. That one halted him. "You have me there, kid." Our disputes were often of this ridiculous sort. Letters would come. "Tim, I was unforgivably rude to you last night." Then I would reply, "You've forgotten, it was *me* who was rude to you."

In the bathroom of the apartment on Central Park West was a Jackson Pollock, carefully glazed. It was from Pollock's best period, 1947–9. I believe that Pollock was influenced by Greenberg at that time. Pollock's work on paper was then most close to his painting on canvas. The pen drawing was exquisite, the painting exquisite too, and also balletic, because he walked round the canvas on the studio floor as he was painting on it. Clem said that he wanted to sell the lovely work in his bathroom. He would have gained a million dollars or so. But he couldn't put it on the market because all the world would know about the sale and thus find yet another reason for criticizing him. At the bottom of the sheet it says "Clem from Jackson," and it had been a birthday present.

Clement Greenberg was born in 1909, so his parents belonged to the nineteenth century. It was a Yiddish-speaking family, originally from the Lithuanian-Jewish enclave. They were socialists and discussed socialism. Clem grew up in Brooklyn and the Bronx. The father wanted the son to become an intellectual—which of course he did—but Clem as a child had a precocious artistic talent. He could draw "photographically," to use the popular and misleading expression, and thought that he might become an artist. In his teens he attended the Art Students League. Then he got himself to Syracuse University, graduating in 1930. At that period most other institutions of higher education did not admit Jews or were hostile to them. My interest is in the

three years of Greenberg's "self-education," as he called it, when he studied by himself while employed by the U.S. Customs Service in some shed down by the Hudson waterfront. This was in the mid-1930s, in the Depression.

Self-education is never to be condemned, but totally self-educated people, as Greenberg used to remark, are often egotistical and boring. He had met many folk of that sort in the world of art. To their own annoyance, Greenberg was always annoyed by artists who read too many books or thought that they could write books. Of his bookish Abstract Expressionist contemporaries, he loved Barnett Newman, but did not wish to talk to him about theories of anarchism. The self-proclaimed intellectual Robert Motherwell he found empty, absurd. "Get away from me, you cripple!" (not the expression of one of nature's barmen), Greenberg shouted when David Hockney spoke to him at a party about his plans for a volume of his thoughts. Bewildered, Hockney did not realize that Greenberg thought him an intellectual rather than a physical cripple. Clem made many enemies with remarks of this sort. I think that this trait in Greenberg's character came from the memory of his own self-education, of which he seldom spoke. But he must have taught himself in a dedicated and disciplined way, while also finding some joyful freedom of thought. I asked him once whether Jews were better at self-education than other people. "Of course, you've got it, kid."

What is the nature, and the history, of self-education? We can easily imagine what is most often read: politics, philosophy, Marx. Self-educating people are attracted to such topics because of their efforts to become wise. But on the whole they do not study languages. Greenberg was an exception. Sitting in his customs shed, he applied himself to German, Latin, Italian, and French. Thus he approached books through different tongues. Despite his enormous, demanding personality he always had the selflessness that we find in dedicated lin-

guists; and I believe that this is a clue to the rarefied and even humble appreciation that he gave to art. It is significant that Greenberg always wrote least about the paintings and sculptures that he loved best, especially if their artists were his friends.

Politically, the young Greenberg belonged to the leftward side of humanity and in particular to American "cultural Trotskyism." This cast of mind led him to the group of intellectuals behind *Partisan Review*. Trotsky, apparently, thought that the people of *Partisan Review* were more interested in culture than in the forthcoming socialist revolution. That may well have been so, for they were writers. The group included William Phillips, Philip Rahv, Dwight Macdonald, Mary McCarthy, Lionel Trilling, and Delmore Schwarz. Greenberg and the crazy Schwarz amused each other in various ways. They were friends rather than comrades. When Greenberg joined *Partisan Review* as an editor in 1939 (at a period when he was making some of the first English translations from Brecht and Kafka), he stood a little apart from the people who were nominally his comrades and colleagues. First, he was the only one of them who was truly interested in the visual arts. Secondly, Greenberg was obsessed with the idea that high culture could only be achieved within the context of American socialism. No one else at *Partisan Review* had such a utopian and futile vision.

We should think of this emphasis on culture in a worldwide context. It became part of the desire to rebuild global society after Hitler's war. The desire for culture may be glimpsed in the operations of UNESCO and such books as UNESCO's *Reflections on Our Age* (no date, but from 1946), which consists of a predictable foreword by Stephen Spender, then the texts of papers read at a conference at the Sorbonne by, among many others, Jean-Paul Sartre ("The Responsibility of the Writer"), André Malraux ("Man and Artistic Culture"), Louis Aragon ("The Many and the Few"), Maurice Bowra ("International Aspects of Education"), and

Herbert Read (“The Plight of the Visual Arts”). Nearly half-a-century later, Read’s lecture still enraged Greenberg. These generally amiable statements are quite unlike Greenberg’s contemporary writing, especially his famous first essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in which he contrasted true and elevated culture, which he believed to belong to the avant-garde (as he understood the term) with the meretricious and second-hand, the pseudo-art of the new capitalism. It is an essay of immense power and ambition. Put beside Greenberg’s urgent reflections, the addresses contained within *Reflections on Our Age* are meaningless. Greenberg traveled to Europe and presented himself to such figures as Jean-Paul Sartre (for whose *Les Temps modernes*, he wrote an essay on modern American art, which has still not been translated into English) and Ignazio Silone, but nothing much came from these encounters. The great benefit of his European expeditions was his study of paintings in classic museums. Greenberg regarded Renaissance artists as though they were his younger contemporaries. I found his conversation on old-master painting quite as thrilling as his discussion of new art.

By 1948 Greenberg was describing himself as a “disabused former Marxist.” He was mixing with the painters and sculptors who were his comrades in the Abstract Expressionist school, and he realized that his future role in life was to be an art critic. Greenberg had no model to emulate within the field of art criticism. Instead he turned to T. S. Eliot. I have no doubt (for he told me so himself) that Greenberg wished to write about art with the perception and authority that Eliot had brought to literature. It happened that in this year, 1948, Eliot issued a book whose title, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, would have immediately seized Greenberg’s attention. The preface to the first edition (dated January 1948) is uneasy. It states that parts of the book had appeared elsewhere, in periodicals, but omits to mention that *Partisan Review* had been among these reviews. I like to think of the narrowed eyes of the “PR

crowd,” with their cigars and tumblers of bourbon, as Eliot’s prim formulations arrived in the New York office.

Thoughts of Eliot haunted Greenberg for many years after he had rejected his ideas about society, had absorbed his criticism, and—because he knew his poetry by heart—could not come freshly to his creative work. This is a common experience, I believe, among Eliot’s admirers. A vital part of Greenberg’s character was his apparently insatiable desire for the fresh experience of art. He always said that he learned most about innovation, and how to use his eyes to discriminate, from the German painter Hans Hofmann, who ran a little painting school in downtown Manhattan. Many painters of the Abstract Expressionist school went to his classes, and Hofmann’s influence extended beyond his academy. The school was experimental in nature, but Hofmann had many theories that derived from his former acquaintance with Kandinsky and other European artists. It is clear that he was an immensely gifted teacher. However, as is often the case with great teachers (especially in the field of modern art), it is hard to say of what that teaching consisted. This problem is the more difficult to approach because Hofmann’s English was so limited. Many of his pupils could not understand what he was saying. But Greenberg knew German, so he could assess Hofmann’s ideas. He also saw the point of his art. Hofmann was producing the most splendidly unorthodox paintings of the midcentury. Proof of Greenberg’s understanding of Hofmann is to be found in his cerebral little monograph on the painter, published in Paris in 1961. I am fortunate to have it on my shelves, but I have never even seen another copy.

Greenberg’s publishing record—as far as books are concerned—was disastrous. He never had a sensible relationship with a publisher. He worked on some books that were never completed or, if they were finished, were never issued. Probably the most important of them was an account of Jack-

son Pollock, who died in 1956. Greenberg allowed it to be known that he was writing this book until as late as 1961. Then nothing more was heard of the work. In the 1970s he was compiling, rather than composing, a book he called "my home-made aesthetics." From the parts one saw, it consisted of brief, wonderful ruminations on all aspects of art. In 1948 he had published a book on Miró. It is excellent, but Greenberg didn't like it (partly, perhaps, because of its preface by Ernest Hemingway) and made sure that it was suppressed. Even close artist friends were unaware that such a book had ever existed.

Clement Greenberg's reputation as an art critic ought to rest on his *Art and Culture* (1961). Alas, this beautiful book, always rare, has been unavailable for the last quarter of a century. For some years it was my task to find a publisher who might be prepared to reissue the slender but extremely potent volume. I kept trying, and my literary agent—from a large and old-established firm—was enlisted in the search. No publisher would touch the book. Most of them wouldn't even read it. When I finally reported failure to Clem he said that he didn't care. This was not the complete truth, for (privately, never publicly) he was proud of his writing. *Art and Culture* is composed of a series of essays, originally printed in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *Commentary*, *Arts*, and *The New Leader*. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" was too much of its time and place to be revised, but practically everything else in the book had been rewritten. Greenberg's intention was perfectly clear. He wished his book to be a classic. And so it is. *Art and Culture* is the best single work of modern art criticism, and, since art criticism belongs specifically to the age of the avant-garde, it may well be the best book of art criticism ever written.

In writing this, I of course do not mean that Greenberg was in competition with Ruskin or Baudelaire, both of whom he revered. But he thought that they were writing nineteenth-century literature. Greenberg

became the leading art critic of the twentieth century and of the period of high modern art that has now closed. It does seem that intellectual Jewish New York in the later 1940s was an excellent vantage point from which to survey the development of artistic modernism. *Art and Culture* proves as much. There has never been a decent art critic who has not been in the first place an excellent art historian. Greenberg was indeed an historian, though he did not often cite dates, or even the titles of pictures. *Art and Culture* is filled not so much with art-historical knowledge, which is seldom displayed as such, but with art-historical wisdom, which is to be found on every page.

Greenberg read, looked, and wrote all the time. In his later years few people realized the extent of his erudition. Some people who appreciated him—artists, on the whole—regarded him as an oracle, mainly because of the vigor and certainty of his talk. But he wasn't an oracle. He was human. The whole point about oracles, and thus their lack of value, is that they do not read and discuss books. Greenberg did, but often one had to dig the knowledge out of him while being abused for being young or for being a Limey or for not smoking big cigars or for not understanding Kant. This was one reason why the tutorials in the Dorchester bar were so thrilling and could easily become quarrelsome. I often thought that if he had been less hostile to universities, Greenberg might have had a proper following among learned people, and might have been less reviled by the theorists of modern art. What a teacher he might have been! But a university environment would not have suited him, and he would not have suited a university. He was too "difficult," whatever that means.

I once tried to get him out of the Dorchester to visit an exhibition. "I wouldn't go to see an interesting young artist even if I were living in fifteenth-century Florence!" Such a remark was typical of one side of Clem. He just felt like being contradictory. The fact is that he went all over the world

looking for interesting art, new as well as old, and was never more alive than when he was in exhibitions or in artists' studios. I have presented Greenberg as a tough, contrary man, which he was. Yet with artists he liked, and there were many of them, he was as gentle as a sister.

I briefly mention just some of these artists. It is important that Greenberg belonged to the generation that produced Abstract Expressionism. Seen from afar, Abstract Expressionism now appears as a movement that had long, slow, and often uncertain beginnings, all too brief a period of supreme achievement, and then a rapid descent into mannerism and fashionableness. Greenberg realized that this was the pattern, even as it was happening. His first period of self-education corresponds with the efforts of contemporary artists to find a genuine American idiom that would break with the School of Paris. And then, as in the art of his friend Jackson Pollock, there was an especial new confidence, even majesty, in Greenberg's mind at the end of the 1940s. This was the time when he had given up Trotskyism and the exhausted, ingrown world of *Partisan Review* and fully devoted himself to art.

There is no doubt that Pollock meant more to him than any other artist. He wouldn't talk much about "Jackson." Perhaps it was too painful. In Pollock's personal tragedy he saw a metaphor for the disasters of American life and art, and also his own life. Greenberg was usually drunk when I heard him say such things. Pollock drank because he desired oblivion. "He was an alcoholic *in excelsis*," Clem used to say. Greenberg drank because he was unhappy: being so intelligent, oblivion was the last thing he wanted. Pollock never allowed anyone else in the studio when he was painting (and he never painted when he was drunk), but Greenberg was probably the first person—after Lee Krasner, Pollock's wife—to see any new set of paintings. I think Greenberg urged Pollock in some directions and tried to hold him back from other paths. In any case, anyone who knew

Greenberg will be certain that he did not keep his reactions to himself.

In the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism, Greenberg favored clear, open, abstract painting with an emphasis on color and bold shapes. It was the leading painterly (and sculptural) style of the 1960s. Now there was a new group of artists, all of whom were just as indebted to Greenberg, the active and directing critic in the studio, as they were to each other. They included the painters Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski, with the sculptors David Smith (an old friend from Abstract Expressionist days) and Anthony Caro, who, in the 1960s, was just as much an American as an English artist. All of these people in the "Greenberg family" made art of a very high order, work that went immediately into museums and the most prestigious American collections. The artists suddenly found that they were rich, and Greenberg, too, became a wealthy man.

I don't know that lots of money is always good for artists, but wealth certainly suited Clem. Physically, he wasn't large (but this hadn't stopped him from being a fistfighter at parties in his earlier days), and he was as thin as a refugee. His clothes were American or sometimes curiously English. I think he even had a jacket with oval leather patches on the elbows. But somehow, in an American way, wealth shone from Clem and seemed to add stature and weight to his frame. He had a very Jewish face. A remarkable feature was the immense bald dome of his head. The cranium was just like those portraits of Shakespeare. I've heard it said that he was the original "egghead," an American term that came into widespread use in the years when he was most active in the world of American highbrow magazines. "Highbrow" was one of his words, often used in a combative way. "I'm a highbrow. What are you?"

A problem with the aura of wealth was that it obscured Greenberg's intellectualism. It was resented by young people in the art world, who tend to be radicals. The wealth

—that Dorchester bar sort of wealth—concealed Greenberg’s intellect and artistic taste. Nor were his views popular in the new artistic climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He said that Pop Art was no good. He wrote that Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol were bad artists. He had no time for conceptual art. Greenberg claimed that all types of “novelty art,” to use his phrase, were more threatening to culture than the middlebrow art he had criticized in the years after the war. The next artistic movement of any value, he predicted, would come from the “middle ground,” not from youngsters whose only desire was to be “far out.” These are not unreasonable opinions, and they are shared by very many cultivated people. But Greenberg was labeled a reactionary, a tyrant, a would-be manipulator of the art market, a simpleton, and probably an agent of the CIA, for had he not contributed to *Encounter* and broadcast on the *Voice of America*?

All these things, and more, are said and printed by people who have not read Greenberg’s writing. There was something like a vendetta—which still goes on, years after his death in 1994—and it is a discredit to the art world. Some of the attacks were deliberately disgusting. In one famous London art school, a tutor persuaded students to rip pages from their library’s copy of *Art and Culture*, chew them, then expectorate the chewed paper into a bowl of acid. I knew a couple of the students concerned. They told me that they had been so full of drugs that they did not know what the book was, or what they were doing. But their tutor knew, and he kept the results of their exercise, claiming that it was part of his oeuvre. The chewed-up book was respectfully displayed in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1991–2. The curator of the show claimed that it was “a major piece of conceptual art.”

I mention this episode, and the Oxford exhibition, for two reasons. First, it ought

to be known that Clem had many troubles of this sort in his later years, when he was often ill, was not sober at occasions when he should have been dignified, and suffered periods when he could only lie on his bed and read, not being able to write or converse. He died penniless, swindled by a “financial advisor.” It is true that Clem’s manner often invited hostilities, and he quarrelled with people who were his friends as well as with people who were not his friends. He was none the less a person to be treasured. Secondly, Greenberg believed that our new museums of contemporary art have no true commitment to aesthetic values or liberal knowledge. Indeed, from about the mid-1970s, he feared that art itself was in decline. This foreboding does not prove that he was a reactionary—quite the contrary, in my view. A transcript of some things he said in a radio broadcast for the United States Information Service is worth quoting because it clearly defines his belief about art as a minor part of life. I wish he himself had known more happiness.

I say that if you have to choose between life and happiness or art, remember always to choose life and happiness. Art solves nothing, either for the artist himself or for those who receive his art. Art shouldn’t be overrated. It started to be in the latter eighteenth century, and definitely was in the nineteenth. The Germans started the business of assessing the worth of society by the quality of art it produced. But the quality of art produced in a society does not necessarily—or maybe seldom—reflect the degree of well-being enjoyed by most of its members. And well-being comes first. I deplore the tendency to over-value art.

Wise words from an art critic—and, you notice, not at all utopian. One of the things that annoyed Greenberg about the nineteenth century was its tendency to have utopian ideas. He himself was a realist, a personally miserable realist.

Looking backward at Edward Bellamy's utopia

by Martin Gardner

No man any more has any care for the morrow, either for himself or his children, for the nation guarantees the nurture, education, and comfortable maintenance of every citizen from the cradle to the grave.

—Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*

Looking Backward: 2000–1887, by Edward Bellamy (1850–1898) is far and away the most popular, most influential utopia novel ever written, and also one of the worst. In its endless reprintings, it has sold over a million copies and been translated into twenty languages. Soon after its appearance in 1888, some hundred books were published either attacking Bellamy's vision of Boston in the year 2000 or defending it. About half of these books were utopias with such titles as *Looking Ahead*, *Looking Beyond*, *Looking Within*, *Looking Forward*, all even more preposterous than Bellamy's.

William Dean Howells was so taken by *Looking Backward* that he wrote two utopia novels of his own, *A Traveler from Altruria* and *Through the Eye of the Needle*. Both books resemble Bellamy's in their replacement of unbridled capitalism by a moneyless socialist state. The English poet and socialist William Morris was so infuriated by what he called Bellamy's "horrible cockney dream" that he wrote *News From Nowhere* about a less regimented future society with more of an emphasis on crafts than on machinery.¹

Looking Backward had an enormous effect

on Eugene Debs and the later American labor and political leaders who called themselves socialists. In an essay "How I Became A Socialist," Debs thanked Bellamy for "helping me out of darkness into light." The book left its mark on such American socialists and liberals as Norman Thomas, Upton Sinclair, John Dewey, Scott Nearing, Lincoln Steffens, Jack London, Charles Beard, Carl Sandburg, and Erich Fromm. Socialist leaders in England and Europe were also influenced by the book. Leo Tolstoy translated it into Russian.

Vernon Parrington, in the third volume of *Main Currents in American Thought*, devoted fourteen pages to a sympathetic account of *Looking Backward*. David Riesman, in his biography of Thorstein Veblen, told how Bellamy's utopia altered the lives of Veblen and his wife, and persuaded Veblen to shift his academic training from philosophy to economics. The engineer Arthur Ernest Morgan, chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority under Franklin Roosevelt, and for sixteen years president of Antioch University, thought so highly of *Looking*

¹ The most recent fictional spinoffs from Bellamy's utopia are two novels by the science-fiction writer Mack Reynolds: *Looking Backward From the Year 2000* (1973), and *Equality in the Year 2000* (1977). The hero, named after Bellamy's, goes to sleep and awakes to find a world transformed by nuclear fission energy. Reynolds was an active member of America's Socialist Labor Party.

Backward that he wrote Bellamy's first biography. In *Nowhere and Somewhere: How History Makes Utopias and How Utopias Make History* (1946), Morgan discussed the influence of *Looking Backward* on the shapers of Roosevelt's New Deal, especially on Adolf Berle, Jr., whose father was a friend and disciple of Bellamy. "Striking parallels may be drawn," Morgan wrote,

between *Looking Backward* and various important aspects of New Deal public policy. It may be said with considerable force that to understand the long range implication of the New Deal one must read *Looking Backward*.

Heywood Broun, during his Soviet fellow-traveling phase and before he converted to Catholicism, wrote an effusive introduction to the Modern Library's edition of *Looking Backward*. Bellamy's utopia, Broun wrote, aroused his first interest in socialism. He thought its description of America in 2000 was "close to an entirely practical and possible scheme of life. . . . there is at least a fair chance that another fifty years will confirm Bellamy's position as one of the authentic prophets of our age."

Oscar Ameringer, known as the Mark Twain of American socialism because of his comic wit, had this to say in his autobiography *If You Don't Weaken*:

Yes, yes, *Looking Backward*. A great book. A very great book. One of the greatest, most prophetic books this country has produced. It didn't make me look backward, it made me look forward, and I haven't got over looking forward since I read *Looking Backward*.

Krishan Kumar, in *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, quotes John Dewey:

Bellamy was an American and a New Englander in more than a geographical sense. He was imbued with a religious faith in the democratic ideal. But for that very reason he saw through the sham and pretence that exists or can exist in the present economic system. I could fill pages with quotations in which he

exposes his profound conviction that our democratic government is a veiled plutocracy. He was far from being the originator of this idea. But what distinguishes Bellamy is the clear ardor with which he grasped the *human* meaning of democracy as an idea of equality and liberty, and portrayed the complete contradiction between our present economic system and the realization of human equality and liberty. No one has carried through the idea that equality is obtainable only by complete equality of income more fully than Bellamy. Again, what distinguishes him is that he derives his zeal and his insight from devotion to an American ideal of democracy.

Bellamy was a shy, genial, slender, lifelong New Englander. The son of a Baptist minister, he began his career as a journalist. He became an attorney but never practiced. Several of his early novels and a raft of science-fiction tales are now totally forgotten, but *Looking Backward* became an instant bestseller, second in the century only to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It has never been out of print. At the moment at least seven editions are available in the U.S., including a two-dollar Dover paperback.

Looking Backward is narrated by Julian West, a rich, politically conservative young man living in Boston in 1887 and engaged to Edith Bartlett. He suffers from insomnia. Because little noises keep him awake at night he builds a soundproof cellar and hires a mesmerist to put him to sleep. A servant is trained to wake him in the morning. While he is in a deep trance-like slumber, his house burns down. The basement vault is not discovered and it is assumed that West died in the fire.

Fast forward to the fall of 2000. Dr. Leete, a retired physician, has built a house on West's former property. An excavation reveals the hidden cellar and within it the perfectly preserved body of West. He has slept for 113 years. This notion of someone entering the future by way of a big sleep had been used many times before—"Rip Van Winkle," for example—and would be used again, notably by H. G. Wells in his

dystopia *When the Sleeper Wakes* and by Woody Allen in his 1973 movie *Sleeper*.

After being aroused from his hypnotic trance, West becomes the guest of Dr. Leete, his wife, and his daughter, Edith. West is attracted at once by the "faultless luxuriance" of Edith's figure and her "bewitching" face. The rest of the novel is a detailed account of the brave new world of 2000 in which West is now amazed to find himself. Dr. Leete has an annoying habit of laughing at almost everything that West has to say about nineteenth-century Boston, and Edith blushes at West's slightest remarks. The romance between Julian and this second Edith is embarrassingly mawkish. It turns out that she is the great-granddaughter of the earlier Edith, and there is even a hint that she is West's former fiancée reincarnated. Did Bellamy intend "E. Leete" to be a pun, as Everett Bleiler suggests in his massive *Science Fiction: The Early Years*?

Like Marx's *Das Kapital*, which had little influence on Bellamy,² *Looking Backward* gives a fairly accurate picture of the evils of a totally unregulated capitalism. The nation's economy in the late nineteenth century was in the grip of gigantic trusts. Graft was rampant in big cities. Labor unions were just getting organized and there were bitter, bloody strikes. The air was dense with coal smoke. Anarchists were blowing up buildings. Everywhere there was enormous wealth alongside slums and miserable poverty.

Julian West's famous allegory of the coach

appears in the first chapter of *Looking Backward*. It likens nineteenth-century America to a "prodigious coach" that is being pulled slowly over rough terrain by workers who are harnessed like beasts to a long rope. The coach's driver is hunger. By lashing the workers, hunger forces them to keep pulling. Riding on the coach in comfortable seats are the rich capitalists. When workers faint from hunger, the riders urge them to be patient. If they become injured or crippled, the rich, out of compassion, give them salves and liniments. They agree it is a great pity that the coach is so hard to pull. The gap between themselves and the poor is rationalized by the "hallucination" that they are made of "finer clay" than the rope pullers.

West's account of the vast changes that have taken place in the twentieth century is, as in all utopias, a bizarre mix of hits and misses. Its most spectacular hit is not its vision of America in 2000, but its description of a command economy that strongly resembles the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin, especially their dream of the Communist state they believed would follow a temporary but necessary "dictatorship of the proletariat." It's as if West awoke not in Boston but in Lenin's Moscow!

In the early years of the twentieth century, as Dr. Leete informs West, the great monopolies grew larger and more powerful. No violent worker revolution occurred as in Russia. Unregulated capitalism slowly evolved until the state took over the monopolies and all other means of production to become one monstrous trust, the country's sole capitalist and land owner. The profit motive was gradually replaced by a patriotic desire on the part of everyone to serve the government. Political parties, labor unions, banks, prisons, and retail stores all vanished. In the absence of greed, there was no government corruption. Even prostitution became extinct. Everybody loved everybody. Crime faded away except for a few unfortunate souls who are mentally ill. They are treated in mental hospitals.

² The books that probably had the greatest impact on Bellamy's socialism were *The Coming Revolution* (1880) and *The Cooperative Commonwealth* (1884) by the Danish-born Laurence Gronlund, a promoter of the Socialist Labor Party. The plot of *Looking Backward*, though little else, may have been partly borrowed from a now forgotten utopian novel, *The Diothas or a Far Look Ahead* (1881) by Ismar Thiuse, pseudonym of John MacNic, professor of French and German at the University of North Dakota. The narrator is projected into the far future by mesmerism, where he marries a reincarnation of Edith, his former sweetheart.

As in the land of Oz, money has totally disappeared. As the nation's sole employer, the government pays no wages. Instead, it provides each citizen with an annual allotment of goods and services. Everyone carries a cardboard credit card that is punched each time a purchase is made or a service rendered.

Edith takes West to a building where samples of all available goods are on display. Their prices, strictly controlled, are in dollars and cents, but these numbers, like algebraic letters, are no more than symbols to aid government accounting. There is no advertising. A buyer tells a clerk what he or she wants, orders are sent through pneumatic tubes to a warehouse, then the goods are shipped through larger tubes to spots from which they are delivered to houses.

There are no household servants. Washing is done in public laundries. Medical and health care is completely socialized. You may choose your doctor. His pay, in the form of goods, is the same as everyone else, including laborers. Public kitchens provide food for home meals, though most people take their main meal at government-run restaurants.

Prizes go to workers for exceptionally good work. If they refuse to do their job properly they are put in solitary confinement on bread and water. Work hours are short and vacations regular. Those too ill to work are placed in "invalid corps" where they do whatever they can. The lame, sick, and blind all receive the same goods as others. There is no longer a division between rich and poor. From each according to his abilities, as a popular Marxist slogan had it, and to each according to his needs.

The state operates like a vast military complex. Every man is conscripted at age twenty-one to serve as a common laborer. At twenty-four, all persons, male and female, are given tests to determine their natural aptitudes and wishes. State-run colleges train them for a profession. Some choose "brain work" such as music, art, science, writing, and so on. Workers are free

later to change jobs and to live where they like. Retirement is compulsory at age forty-five. October 15 is Muster Day on which those of twenty-four enter the work force and those of forty-five are mustered out.

All books and newspapers are published by the government, though there is no censorship and one may write anything he or she pleases. Authors pay for first printings. If a book or periodical sells well, the author receives a royalty in the form of goods. Red Ribbons are awarded to outstanding brain workers.

There is no jury system, no attorneys. Legal decisions are made by judges appointed by the president. State governments have vanished. A congress meets once every five years, though just what it does is unclear because new laws are no longer needed. All schools and colleges are run by the state.

What about religion? There are no churches or clergy, no denominations or sects. Persons are free to express their religious opinions in sermons delivered over a telephone system, but the dominant religion is a vague sort of theism, based on the ethical teaching of Jesus to love God and neighbor, much like the deism of the founding fathers.

Fossil fuels have been replaced by electric power that provides heat and light. The air is free of pollution. Chimneys are nowhere to be seen. Wars have become relics of the past, replaced by what William James called its "moral equivalent," working for a better world. All the world's great nations have become command socialisms with universally honored credit cards. There is free trade, free emigration, and the stirrings of a world government. Everyone speaks a native language and a universal language, the nature of which is not specified. Democracy of a sort exists by voting at various government levels. The president, chosen by a small group of peers, serves for five years.

The novel's plot takes a surprising turn at the end. West falls asleep and wakes up back in nineteenth-century Boston convinced that his visit to 2000 was only a

dream. He tries to interest others in his dream's utopia only to be ridiculed and thought mad. He then wakes up to find himself back in Boston in the year 2000, the real world, to marry Edith and live happily as a lecturer on the sins of capitalism.

Bellamy never used the word "socialism," a term he hated because it suggested European influences and violent revolutions. He called his ideology nationalism. It is hard now to believe, but so persuasive was his rhetoric that over 150 groups called Nationalist Clubs or Bellamy Clubs sprang up throughout the land. There was even a short-lived Nationalist Party. Two journals promoting nationalism flourished for a few years: *The Nationalist* (1889–1894), and Bellamy's own monthly, *The New Nation* (1891–1894). There were other periodicals that debated nationalism. The populist movement, embodied in the People's Party, owed a great debt to nationalism.

Not much is said in *Looking Backward* about the role of women in 2000 except that they serve as an auxiliary force in the industrial army under a female general. A much more detailed account of the status of women appears in *Equality* (1897), Bellamy's lengthy sequel to *Looking Backward*. West continues as narrator. The book makes clear that women enter the work place as equal to men in all respects except for participation in athletic games. Edith, for example, works on a farm. Bellamy supported the suffrage movement, and the early feminist leaders considered him one of their heroes.

In *Looking Backward*, Edith dresses in nineteenth-century attire so as not to disturb Julian, who is in a perpetual state of shock over everything he sees. In *Equality*, Edith reveals to Julian the clothes she actually prefers. They are men's suits with trousers. Clothes in 2000 are made of paper and discarded after being worn. Also made of paper are shoes, carpets, sheets, draperies, dishes, even pots and pans. When discarded they are recycled to be used in making other things.

Girls, we are told, take over their moth-

er's last name with their father's name as their middle name. Boys do the reverse. Women have free choice over the number of children they desire, though Bellamy is silent about birth control methods and abortions. The pessimism of Malthus has been answered by a stable world population. Blacks are nowhere mentioned in *Looking Backward*. In *Equality*, in a section headed "The Colored Races and the New Order," it is explained that after the freeing of slaves they were soon absorbed into the new order as equal to whites in all respects, although there continues to be no social "commingling" of the two races.

Equality's chapter 19, "Can a Maid Forget Her Ornaments?" (a quotation from Jeremiah 2:32), is pure Veblen. Women no longer wear rings or other costly jewelry to serve as badges of wealth. Since there is no longer a distinction between rich and poor there is no need for such displays. Conspicuous waste has gone the way of the profit motive. When West mentions that in his day persons actually thought that diamonds and other precious stones were intrinsically beautiful, Dr. Leete's reply could have come straight out of Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*:

"Yes, I suppose savage races honestly thought so, but, being honest, they did not distinguish between precious stones and glass beads so long as both were equally shiny. As to the pretension of civilized persons to admire gems or gold for their intrinsic beauty apart from their value, I suspect that was a more or less unconscious sham. Suppose, by any sudden abundance, diamonds of the first water had gone down to the value of bottle glass, how much longer do you think they would have been worn by anybody in your day?"

One of Bellamy's most successful predictions is what he calls an electroscope. Although its sounds and images come over telephone cables, it is connected to a worldwide network of wires so that it functions exactly like today's television. Not only does it allow home owners to enjoy

music, plays, operas, and lectures, but it also permits viewers to see live news events wherever they occur around the world.

Umbrellas have become obsolete because when it rains waterproof canopies are lowered over sidewalks and street corners. Water, electricity, and mail are, of course, free to all households. Horses have been replaced by trains and electric cars. West converses with a young farm lass who is plowing a field with an electric machine. Flesh eating has been abandoned for strictly vegetarian diets.

Several chapters in *Equality* describe West's view of Boston and its suburbs from what is called an "air-car." Submarines are mentioned. Of course, Bellamy could not conceive of atomic energy, although he does mention that past wars were fought by dropping dynamite from air-cars—the "ghastly dew" in a passage quoted from a Tennyson poem about the future. Nor should we fault Bellamy for not anticipating computers, the moon walk, space probes of planets, and all the other wonders of twentieth-century physics, chemistry, medicine, and genetics.

There is nothing about psychic phenomena in Bellamy's two utopia novels, but throughout his short life he was fascinated by the paranormal. Extra Sensory Perception is featured in several of his short stories. "To Whom They May Come" tells of an island where natives communicate with each other only by telepathy, a notion that H. G. Wells exploited in his finest utopia, *Men Like Gods*. *Miss Luddington's Sister*, one of Bellamy's early novels, is about spiritualism.

Always in poor health, Bellamy died of tuberculosis at age forty-eight. Had he lived through the Russian Revolution he would probably have become a dedicated Communist. I do not know whether Lenin or Engels ever actually read Bellamy, although we do know they had only disdain for what they called utopian speculation.

In the final chapter of *Equality*, Dr. Leete does his best to counter the main objections

that conservatives hurl against socialism: that it opposes religion, stifles incentives, discourages originality, leads to political corruption, violates civil rights, makes everybody behave alike, and so on. To the incentive objection, Dr. Leete's unconvincing reply is that under socialism the old desire to maximize one's wealth is replaced by the higher incentives of doing one's work well and contributing to the common good. As it turned out, in every twentieth-century nation where a government, Marxist or fascist, took total control of the economy, the result was a cruel dictatorship in which not only did the predictions cited above prove accurate, but millions of citizens were needlessly slaughtered.

There are two big lessons to be learned from Bellamy's vision of 2000. First, though admirable in its indictment of unfettered capitalism and in its enthusiasm for building a better world, it projected a cure as bad as, if not worse than, the disease. Bellamy's two books reveal with great starkness how naïve and simple-minded were the early socialists both here and abroad. They had no inkling of how socialism would soon come to recognize the power of free-market competition and the baleful results of any effort to eliminate it.

Socialism is, of course, a fuzzy word, as impossible to define precisely as capitalism or Christianity. Bellamy's vision has almost no resemblance to the democratic socialism of Norman Thomas, Michael Harrington, Irving Howe, John Kenneth Galbraith, and other leading American socialists, or to any of today's socialist nations in which a rigorous democracy is combined with a mixed economy that is part free market and part government owned or controlled. In the opinion of Milton Friedman and many other conservatives, the United States is now a model of democratic socialism. In *Freedom to Choose*, Friedman points out that every plank in Thomas's platform from the last time he ran for president has been fulfilled and is now accepted by both Democrats and Republicans. The ability of capitalism to overcome its dark past and be-

come more benign was a development that neither Bellamy nor Marx could foresee.

The second lesson to be learned from Bellamy is that the future is unpredictable, with respect not only to science and technology but also to political and economic change. It's a safe bet that the new millennium will swarm with stupendous surprises that no one now is even capable of imagining. G. K. Chesterton opens *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, a fantasy set like George Orwell's dystopia in 1984, with these wise words:

The human race, to which so many of my

readers belong, has been playing at children's games from the beginning, and will probably do it till the end, which is a nuisance for the few people who grow up. And one of the games to which it is most attached is called "Keep to-morrow dark," and which is also named (by the rustics in Shropshire, I have no doubt) "Cheat the Prophet." The players listen very carefully and respectfully to all that the clever men have to say about what is to happen in the next generation. The players then wait until all the clever men are dead, and bury them nicely. They then go and do something else. That is all. For a race of simple tastes, however, it is great fun.

The river grows muddied: the evolution of English prose

by Martin Greenberg

Modern English prose is usually dated from the Restoration of the Stuarts in 1660. However, so large a generalization requires qualification. Before the seventeenth century had well begun, Bacon for one was writing in a plain (even if highly figurative) style; in him a new cast of mind was conscious of the need for clear, distinct statements to express truth:

For in a great work it is no less necessary that what is admitted should be written succinctly than that what is superfluous should be rejected; though no doubt this kind of chastity and beauty will give less pleasure both to the reader and the writer.

So modern prose, or something close to it, was anticipated by some writers by a half century. Yet all did not change at once with the lapse of the half century. Milton among others in 1660 was still writing in the elaborate rhetorical style of the earlier time as he struggled to revive the expiring Puritan regime by his persuasions. This was a prose which seemed to dissolve a sentence into a copiousness of splendid phrases—or rather not dissolve: seemed not yet to have attained from phrases to a true sentence. I quote from the conclusion to *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*:

But I trust that I shall have spoken persuasion to abundance of sensible and ingenuous men;

to some, perhaps, whom God may raise of these stones to become like children of reviving liberty, and may reclaim, though they seem now choosing them a captain back for Egypt, to bethink themselves a little and consider whither they are rushing; to exhort this torrent also of the people not to be so impetuous, but to keep their due channel; and at length recovering and uniting their better resolutions, now that they see already how open and unbounded the insolence and rage is of our common enemies, to stay these ruinous proceedings, justly and timely fearing to what a precipice of destruction the deluge of this epidemic madness would hurry us, through the defection of a misguided and abused multitude.

Only a very short time after Milton was writing in this fashion (writing fearlessly, for Charles II's restoration to the throne was only weeks away), Dryden was saying, in the dedication to his play *The Rival Ladies* (1664), "I have endeavored to write English, as near as I could distinguish it from the tongue of pedants, and that of affected travellers." By "the tongue of pedants" he meant, I presume, the learned baroque prose of the first part of the century, which meant Milton's too, with clause piled on clause, though crammed more often with classical allusion and citation than biblical. (Milton's poetry was another matter; Dryden set *Paradise Lost* on a level with Homer, Virgil, and Tasso.) The "affected travellers"

were the fops who came back from the continent with their mouths full of French and Italian phrases. "Only I am sorry," he continued, "that (speaking so noble a language as we do) we have not a more certain measure of it, as they have in France, where they have an academy created for that purpose." The gulf that separates Dryden's clear and simple words from Milton's seems huge, the latter's looking almost barbarous to our eyes, or "Gothic" (to use the contemporaneous word), which is the worst insult we could offer the great Renaissance humanist. Various explanations have been given for the sharp shift. It has even been denied, for good reasons, that the shift was so very sharp. Thus the gusto and vigor of the Elizabethans have been seen as continuing in Milton and the other seventeenth-century masters of baroque prose, then as being passed along to the early Augustans who brought the native energy of language under control without extinguishing it. However it may be, the fact is clear: Dryden writes prose more or less the way we do (or wish to do!), Milton's prose, though very beautiful, is antiquated and obscure.

Dryden was the earliest born, in 1631, of the great Augustan prose writers and died just as the new century began. The stimulating book on English prose by Carey McIntosh, published in 1998, is limited to the eighteenth century, so Dryden goes unmentioned in it.¹ But he was the godfather to the eighteenth century writers, most immediately to the early generation of Swift, Addison, Arbuthnot, Congreve, and Gay, to name only literary men and omit other kinds of writers. No group before or since has written better prose. The standard of clarity and intelligibility that Dryden and others established remained the standard for the second half of the century, even when modified importantly by Johnson or given

a different direction by Burke. And even when most obscured and denied in later times, it remained the standard, only waiting to reassert itself. It is what is meant by good English. Orwell said, "Good prose is like a windowpane." But is it still the standard today?

Dryden observed that the basis of "our [Restoration] writing" is "conversation"—meaning the conversation of gentlemen, not lawyers, financiers, or traders. Such prose didn't stand upon its dignity; it was smooth at times, even elegant at times, but it was rough too, not refined—not refined in the way refinement, with Addison's help, came to be understood later. Its writers, more or less at one with their small, upper-class audience, wrote freely in pungent, perspicuous, witty, sometimes brutal, language. Swift, for example, wrote in this way in his *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*. His moral target in the satire is the slack religion of conventional Christians. He pretends with malign Swiftian playfulness that Whigs and Tories have united in agreeing that abolishing Christianity would yield many advantages: for example, by repealing the Sabbath, Britain would no longer incur the grievous loss of one-seventh of its trade, business, and pleasure. "I readily own," he wrote, that

there hath been an old custom, time out of mind, for people to assemble in the churches every Sunday, and that shops are still frequently shut, in order, as it is conceived, to preserve the memory of that ancient practice; but how this can prove a hindrance to business or pleasure is hard to imagine. What if the men of pleasure are forced, one day in the week, to game at home instead of the chocolate house? Are not the taverns and coffee-houses open? Can there be a more convenient season for taking a dose of physic? Are fewer claps got upon Sunday than other days?

This is prose clear as a windowpane (but not neutral like a windowpane). Professor McIntosh's thesis is that the prose of the latter part of the century changed signifi-

¹ *The Evolution of English Prose, 1700–1800: Style, Politeness and Print Culture*, by Carey McIntosh; Cambridge University Press, 276 pages, \$64.95.

cantly from Swift's, from that of the first Augustans: "English in 1790 was a different animal from English in 1710." The difference isn't usually recognized distinctly. The usual thing has been to lump together all the prose under the label "Eighteenth Century," even though no one thinks Goldsmith and Gibbon, Burke and Paine wrote in the same way as Defoe and Addison, Mandeville and Bolingbroke.

The change in style accompanied great social changes: the rapid growth of the middle classes; London turning from a muddy town into a great commercial and financial city, etc., etc. In 1700 London had no daily newspaper; it had fifty-two in 1811. In 1700 in Britain, language was mainly oral, and there was only a limited need for literacy in a largely agricultural population. But commerce grew, industry started up, literacy spread. Toward the end of the century, the country was swimming in printed matter of every kind, and the basis of prose had changed from speech to print; prose became literary, "written." Swift above sounds like a man talking, informal, not polished, not very polite, vigorous with the vigor culminating explosively in "Are fewer claps got upon Sunday than other days?"—which is mild compared with the coolly prepared detonations in *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Tale of a Tub*.

Dryden and the early Augustan men of letters had felt that the English of their time was incorrect and crude, lagging behind the correct French. Swift in 1712 published *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining* [!] *the English Language*. There was a feeling that England had emerged from rude, ill-mannered times and needed to go to school. Grammars and dictionaries began to be published to satisfy the need, their number multiplying in the second half of the century. Locke early, Johnson later believed usage decided what was correct and incorrect—but only the usage of the best writers. However, the grammarians prevailed; the rule of rules—"prescriptivism"—became firmly established, not to be disestablished for a hundred-and-fifty years

and more. A particular rule might indeed be questioned, but not the necessity of rules. And by mid-century, Dryden, Swift, and Addison themselves began to be found fault with by a more punctilious taste. The examples of inexact writing, incorrect syntax, and questionable diction with which the later grammarians filled their books were culled not from the work of inferior writers, but from just some of the greatest prose English can boast of. It seems grammarians found in the latter a disgusting lack of propriety and good taste, the more disgusting the more powerful the writing.

Professor McIntosh is both a literary scholar and a linguist. His analysis, calling on both kinds of understanding, considers such changes in eighteenth-century prose as: periodic and more formally organized sentences in general coming to prevail over loose, speech-based sentences with trailing clauses; nominalization (noun use) and abstraction gaining over verb use and concreteness; more polysyllabic latinate words, tipping over at an extreme into purple prose; and what the author (unpejoratively) calls "gentrification" winning out. "Low" language, which means homely language of any kind, including proverbs, not "bad" language, was decried, and politeness, polish, elegance upheld. English prose became "more polite, precise, correct and less vernacular" as Britain itself, though still a brutal and coarse enough place, becomes more civilized in the eighteenth century. The great wish early in the century was for correctness, and its achievement in the later decades gave the age cause for self-congratulation. But the price paid for correctness was a loss of vigor, correctness meanwhile having changed something of its meaning from what Dryden and Swift had meant. Now it leaned toward decorousness.

Our author expresses no preference for one or the other prose types he discriminates. And of course there is great writing at both ends of the century. He finds Addison and Steele no great stylists and Johnson's language full of power and precision. Power

and precision Johnson surely has, but I agree with Hazlitt: the ding-dong of Johnson's balanced phrases is monotonous, heavy; the oppressiveness of the style relieved however by the lightning flashes of his judgments. And yet from heavy Johnson Jane Austen derived her firm, clear, rational style, as well as other qualities, which she employed in a different time to very different effect. I have the impression too (it's only an impression) that the spirit of eighteenth-century prose survived away from the English center, beyond the marches, in Ireland and Scotland (but not in the United States): Shaw is an example, Joyce and Edwin Muir later ones.

"On the whole," Professor McIntosh writes, "I don't think it was a bad thing for English to be 'gentrified,' but when combed and groomed and corrected, our language lost some of the colloquial vitality it had in Arbuthnot and Swift and Defoe." The last part of the sentence nearly nullifies the first. The loss was no small matter and had, I believe, an adverse influence on the next age. The great writers of the nineteenth century were on the whole not great writers of prose: the outpourings of words, words, words, even if eloquent ones; the overlong sentences, sometimes broken-backed; the less ease; the oppressive literariness. Leaving aside the novelists, I find Hazlitt, with a foot still in the eighteenth century, writing the best prose. Dryden and Burke, the first Augustan and the last, are in him, as starting points; he has ease and clarity from the first, lavishness from the second. But the open personal qualities, the loving intensely, the hating intensely, especially hating humbug, draw all together into writing of great originality. Otherwise you must look to the private sphere for the best nineteenth-century prose, to letters, diaries and journals. Hazlitt has an essay on how bad poets' prose is. But he didn't know Byron's and Keats's now long-admired letters, or Coleridge's more recently admired myriad-minded notebooks and correspondence.

Late-eighteenth-century prose had diverged more and more from speech, and

this continued into the nineteenth century till speech and writing seemed to part company entirely. Finally at the beginning of the twentieth century social change and war broke the grip of what had become a lifeless gentility; speaking and writing drew near again with Lawrence and Forster, Stein and Hemingway: a well-known story. Professor McIntosh quotes linguists whose computer-based studies led them to conclude that the "general drift of English since 1600 has been towards orality," and that the eighteenth century was an exception because an "emerging print culture takes pains to make its written genres more obviously written and less speech like." Linguists have their own indices. It's hard for me to see the book-dominated nineteenth century as returning to a speech-based prose.

Our author writes with good sense about prescriptivism, the once unquestioned understanding that there was a correct English with its appropriate rules: break them and the result is solecism, anacoluthon, and vulgarity. Prescriptivism in English originated in the late seventeenth century with the feeling, mentioned earlier, that the language, unlike French, had been neglected and lacked standards. All the care had gone to Latin. When rules for writing correct English came to prevail after the middle of the eighteenth century, they reflected their source (apart from the ideas of grammarians) in the English educated classes. These rules told against "women, Scots and non-classically educated writers." However, Professor McIntosh continues:

there is another side to the coin of prescriptivism: by formulating and explaining and exemplifying rules for correct and elegant English, the grammarians enabled . . . women, provincials, and working-class people [to gain] access to intellectual and political power. . . . Canons of taste [were] mastered and put to work as ladders to literacy by thousands of ambitious working-class people (including women and Scots and Americans) who wanted to read and write like the gentry.

Learning correct English enabled people debarred from the higher levels of education to raise themselves up. (Not without anguish for some, to judge by Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend*.) Benjamin Franklin, when still hardly more than a boy, becoming aware of how he fell “short in elegance of expression, in method and in perspicuity” in his writing, taught himself these things by an ingenious, step-by-step method of imitation of some Addison essays in the *Spectator*.

Such efforts to raise oneself and others up had opposite democratic motives from the demotic ones of today’s dumbing down. Dumbing down justifies bad English by borrowing the argument of usage from linguistic science: usage rules, not the rules of grammarians. For linguistics, usage is neutral: “The only generalizations about language are inductive generalizations” (Leonard Bloomfield)—i.e., generalizations about what is, not what should be, the case. One usage is no more correct than another. The linguists are right—as scientists. Usage gives laws to language more than logic does—but always under these laws the writer has the power to choose the seemly and avoid the uncouth word, phrase, sentence, as James Bowman said in his piece “Against Linguistic Libertarianism.”² The democratic movement in its early, heroic stages aimed at elevating itself to an equality with the cultural level of the ruling classes. But a demotic strain was lurking in it too. Periodically that strain surfaces to assert an equality which has no content but equality—that is, an equality without reason.

The authority of the rules of English, like most modern authorities, was the more open to attack for its having been compromised by a history of arbitrariness, absolutism, and rigidity. Trivial rules, snobbish rules, priggish rules, class-slanted rules were mixed in with the truly fundamental rules of good English. And there are such rules. “One reason why composition teachers find

themselves explaining some of the same rules that [the grammarians] Lowth [1762] and Priestley [1777] prescribed,” Professor McIntosh writes, “is that many of these rules have a basis in the logic of effective discourse.” If your pronouns are ambiguous in their reference, your meaning is unclear. If subject and verb don’t agree, it jars, sometimes more and sometimes less. English has lost many of its inflections but getting wrong those it has interrupts the flow of language and sometimes muddies the sense. Using articles correctly is often a delicate business; if mismanaged it can spoil a fine shade of meaning.

It needs to be remembered that rules are approximate; violations which are equal formally are often unequal in their direness. The dangling participle Mr. Bowman made up to begin his piece with seems to me to half-dangle only (maybe it’s hard to err deliberately!): “Opening my *Washington Post* to the op-ed page, . . . my eye fell on the opening sentence of David Ignatius’s column.” It’s a half-dangle, I feel, because “my eye fell on” is so very close to “I fell on/happened on.” Whereas the Ignatius sentence—“Sailing smoothly into this first week of the twenty-first century, it’s hard to see storm clouds on the horizon”—is the real McCoy. Reading it, I felt a moment of blankness. To say Ignatius’s participial clause dangles is an understatement; it sails away into pure disconnection, and like a Gulliver in Lilliput the reader needs to reach into the sky and haul it back. A dangling participle is grammatically incoherent. Without coherence there is no language. Even if it is understandable, even if it goes unnoticed, it damages the rationality of language.

The freeing up of prose again at the beginning of the twentieth century led, along with other things, to a great literary renewal. How wonderful is the pure speaking prose of D. H. Lawrence, a voice talking to you so intimately, warmly (though not when he rants). But the relaxation of language, after gradually passing down into the public discourse, into journalism, radio,

² See *The New Criterion* (February 2000).

and television, into the schools, has ended up badly. Dryden wished for “a more certain measure” for English; now it’s as if English has no measure at all. The halls of Congress ring with the crudest language. Catch phrases abound which save the labor and conceal the absence of thought. *The New York Times* editorials are a desert of dreary prose, punctuated with unenlivening popular expressions. What an absence of incisiveness and wit! Elsewhere, in magazines that have some pretensions, how much fake vivacity of language to dress up the commonplace things being said; how much fashionable vulgarity; how much knowingness. Delacroix in his *Journal* said, “Commonplace people have an answer for

everything and nothing ever surprises them.” Of course there is good writing too, more than a little, but not being backed up by acknowledged standards it’s on its own.

Lawrence wrote with colloquial intimacy. Now a false, insolent/ignorant intimacy has spread everywhere, a curse on life and writing. Strangers call you by your first name, although they do not love you. We can’t go back to the old forms. But will we find new ones? You can’t help wondering about the fate of English, that “noble” language as Dryden called it, one’s much loved mother tongue. But then you tell yourself it’s just elderly apprehension. The mighty river of English however muddied is not about to run into the sands.

Poems

by Jendi Reiter & Robley Wilson

Registering bliss

As dessert follows
the carved roast, the appliances of love are ready
to follow love, inevitable as laundry.
Every good play surely transcends
the backstage machinery, the paint and porcelain
mocked up as stone, but how many

good plays are there? Not many
who get this far anticipate how time follows
like an abandoned dog, who breaks the blushing porcelain
and chews the used wrapping paper you're not ready
to throw away—as if memory could transcend
their torn state, like rags you still wash as laundry.

You choose your straight roof and the design of your laundry.
After this time the choices aren't as many
as their consequences, though the cups transcend
their pattern as they're chipped and kissed, and the mattress follows
the rises and depressions of particular bodies. Who'd be ready
to smash a whole set of porcelain

just to choose anew a different pattern of porcelain?
Things are made fresh but never new, like laundry
washed and worn, scented with personality already.
In the yard every year, many fallen seeds sprout and many
blow elsewhere. The lost ones that don't follow
their generative pattern still won't transcend

being in one place and not another. No one transcends
this law of bodies. Whether cups are porcelain
or self-conscious ascetic tin, someone must follow
the feast with washing-up. After passion, laundry
writhes in the machine's many
predictable cycles, emerging pure and ready

as the next white page of the story. No one's ready
to see the bottom of the box of paper, till one transcends
the need to transcend things, which is just one of many
manifestations of the need for things. The porcelain
you chose and the tablecloth fresh from the laundry
wait in the belief that another day follows.

—*Jendi Reiter*

December in Florida

Neighbors across the street
have grapefruit, we have
oranges; this month we meet

halfway to begin the swap,
one color for another,
of our respective crops.

Some celebrate with liquor;
we repair to the garage,
bring down the dusty picker

and circle our laden tree.
Its lower limbs the girls
will glean—for Susan and me

it's the tree's upper reaches
that challenge. Threading
a way through the branches

to capture the highest globe
is to contain the sun
in a basket. Our fondest hope:

to catch down all the fruit
before the citrus rats
out-harvest us. It suits us,

my neighbor and me, to wage
this winter contest.
The shape of the picker cage

mimics a handshake; all year
the barter confirms:
good friends, good will, good cheer.

—*Robley Wilson*

A theatrical cipher

by Mark Steyn

The political season is upon us—or what passes for politics in this post-political society—and in the summer doldrums the theater has been doing its bit. It is, as Bill Clinton would say, a theater that looks like America—or, anyway, looks like Bill Clinton's America: plays about the black condition, plays about the Jewish condition, even a play about a Clintonesque president's condition (not in the medical sense, I hasten to add). I find myself pining for the theatrical lefties of yesteryear, with their earnest tracts about the evils of capitalism, etc. These days, most playwrights seem to take the line, "But enough about the world, let's talk about me."

Thus, *Avon* (at the Century Center), Bill C. Davis's smug, glib, trivial comedy about gay marriage. Tom and Brian, the kind of hunky cutesy gay couple that makes you depressingly aware just how wretchedly déclassé heterosexuality is nowadays, decide they want to get married. So they go to their Catholic priest, who also looks vaguely gay. He refuses to marry them. They are surprised and shocked at this injustice. Predictable complications ensue. Less predictably, Jane Powell shows up in the role of Brian's mom. Miss Powell, the trilling sweetheart of many an MGM musical of yore, is best remembered for introducing: "It's a most unusual day/ Feel like throwing my troubles away." On this occasion, though, the late Alan Sherman's parody seems more apposite:

It's a most unusual play
Feel like throwing my tickets away
'Cause the boy gets the boy
And the girl gets the girl
And it's way too far off-Broadway.

But that was the early Sixties. Now it's not at all unusual. By the time you read this, *The Laramie Project* will have closed at the Union Square, not because box-office was bad but because the SRO run has been cut short in order to film the play for HBO. I would wager that HBO was looking for something on this subject, and that *Laramie* happened to be in finished form and ready to go. It's the work of the director/playwright Moises Kaufman and a long list of collaborating actors/co-writers who go under the name of the Tectonic Theatre Project. I'm not sure what they mean by Tectonic Theatre, but one assumes it's something along the lines of intriguing shifts and ruptures and deformations under the ostensibly placid surface. The trouble with *Laramie* is that it's too placid, especially given its subject matter: the murder of Matthew Shepard, the gay college student strung up on a fence and left to die by a couple of straight guys he may or may not have come on to in a bar.

Having been described in *The New York Times* a while back as "homophobic," I'm now in the curious position of finding *The Laramie Project* insufficiently gay. As I've said before, "homophobic" is a linguistic

abomination: to classicists, it will always mean fear (“phobia”) of the same (“homo”). But to take homophobia in its contemporary gay meaning of a phobia about homos, the homophobes here seem to be the authors. If *The Laramie Project* has a purpose, it’s to make the case for “hate crimes” legislation—to argue that Matthew Shepard was killed because of his gayness. Yet it recoils from his gayness as surely as those bozos in that barroom that night.

The strongest image in the Shepard story is in the first news reports of two years ago: a fellow on a bicycle, riding down the road and spying a figure on a fence that he assumes is some sort of grotesque scarecrow. Next to arrive is a sheriff’s deputy: she can see that the body is still breathing, but the face is impossible to see under the encrusted blood. There are just two thin tracks of visible skin, formed, she deduces, by the tracks of his tears. The deputy tries to wipe away the blood. She learns later that the victim is HIV positive and worries that she has been exposed to AIDS.

No story is simple. Maybe you have to be a hard-hearted homophobe to think there’s something sad about a young college student embarking on adulthood and facing a lifetime of taking every few hours a complicated cocktail of dozens of protease inhibitors which may keep your T-cell count up for a while, though the long-term efficacy of these drugs is unproven. Maybe Matthew Shepard would have died anyway, not at twenty-one but at twenty-five or thirty, not because he was gay and someone killed him but because he was gay and *it* killed him. To consider such a question may be politically impermissible, but it is dramatically imperative, if you choose to take a grisly event and make it into art. It is up to the gay organizations and their cheerleaders in the media if they want to transform Matthew—it’s always “Matthew,” like “Elia”—into a sexless infant, a poster child who’ll always be a child, innocent and unsullied by anything as beastly as fornication: Andrew Sullivan has written more persuasively than I ever could about how perverse an image

the infantile, beatific Matthew is at a time when gays have never been more confident, more open, more varied, and less at risk of being gay-bashed than at any time in American history. If that’s what the custodians of Matthew’s posthumous image are content with, so be it, though it’s almost as if his murderers succeeded in their goal: they clubbed him into a shapeless mush. But that won’t wash as drama, and the vapid blur of Matthew Shepard is the hole at the heart of this play.

Moises Kaufman, who is himself gay, seems to have bent over backwards to avoid accusations of gay agitprop. *The Laramie Project* began, intentionally, as an exercise in journalism: in November 1998, a month after the murder, ten members of Kaufman’s company left New York for Laramie and started conducting interviews. They made half a dozen trips over the next year and recorded more than two hundred people. The transcripts of those interviews, plus diary entries, court documents and other public sources, form the text of the play. The object was to portray a town that had ceased to be a community of individuals and become an event: Waco, Jasper, Littleton, Laramie. There are folks in Waco who aren’t members of some shyster’s commune, there are white men in Jasper with no desire to drag black men to their deaths. How these citizens feel about being reduced to shorthand for some perverse eruption one can guess. Kaufman and his actors set out to do more than that.

Five years ago, quite by chance, I happened to be in another municipality where tragedy struck: Oklahoma City. (I was there for the tryout of something called *JFK—The Musical*.) What was most striking to me was the speed with which the locals learned the approved responses to the bombing: within thirty-six hours of Connie Chung, Diane Sawyer, and the rest of the gang descending on the city, cops, waitresses, and grieving parents had all begun to talk like their TV confreres, both fictitious and “real”; everyone quickly mastered mediaspeak, initially

confirming to Connie that she was right to suggest “the town needs time to heal” and then, by the time Diane came round, being savvy enough to volunteer the response. Interviewing is a fraught enough process as it is. My small New England community has recently been compiling an “oral history” of the town through the recollections of old-timers as interviewed by friends, family, and neighbors. There are a lot of generalities:

“The Hurricane of ’38, that must have been pretty exciting.”

“Oh, yeah. Hurricane of ’38. That was exciting, alright. Quite a hurricane. Never seen nothin’ like that. I’ll never forget that. What a hurricane that was.”

But one elderly lady didn’t seem to realize she was being taped and talked about her first period for three-quarters of an hour. Then the tape ran out.

In extreme circumstances like Laramie and Oklahoma City, the problem is reversed. Everyone’s been interviewed too often, they’ve become aware of what the other interviewees say, what makes the interviewers happy, what answers they’re looking for, and how to polish and hone them till they have the same compressed efficiency as a laxative ad. I’m a professional interviewer, and in Oklahoma City I had difficulties getting the natives to say anything real, as opposed to what passes for “real” in TV and newspaper quotes. Sending a bunch of actors and actresses out to Wyoming, Moises Kaufman was never likely to pierce the controlled, ruefully self-aware attitude Laramie began projecting within hours of the body’s discovery. The mode is distilled to its essence in the response of one citizen to their murderous spawn: “We don’t grow children like that here. But it’s pretty clear we do grow children like that here.” What a line. You can imagine how pleased ABC or CBS or *The New York Times* or whoever first teased it out must have been, and how they couldn’t quite hide their pleasure from the inter-

viewee, and how the interviewee noted it, and worked on the line, until it sounded just that: a line. After ABC got into trouble for sending Leonardo DiCaprio along to interview the president about the environment, the news division’s executive supremo, David Westin, sent out a memo clarifying company policy: “All roles of journalists must be played by journalists (duh!).” In a town under media siege, members of the public quickly learn how to play members of the public. (Duh!)

But Kaufman manages to make his problems worse by going to extraordinary lengths to “respect” his interviewees—among them, the police chief, a lady rancher, a lesbian waitress, a Muslim feminist, a drama student who’s taken a gay role in *Angels In America* . . . Whoa, hang on. A Muslim feminist? Just how typical a “small town” is Laramie? Several of the New York critics seemed to think we were in Thornton Wilder country and that Laramie was the dark underbelly of Grover’s Corners. But Laramie has a population of 27,000 and in Thornton Wilder’s New Hampshire that would make it a big city, not a small town. Laramie is, more correctly, a college town, and, wherever they’re plunked down in whichever state, college towns exist in an uneasy tension with the surrounding landscape. Yes, they bring in a more “diverse” population, but that’s because the natives aren’t qualified for the hot jobs at the college, so what you tend to wind up with is a well-paid “diverse” community being serviced by a low-paid non-diverse community. That’s bound to cause a few problems. Yet Kaufman and Co. approach Laramie as if they’re traveling up the Amazon to a remote village no white man has ever set foot in. I haven’t seen anything so ridiculous since *The Independent*, a British newspaper, decided one summer that it wanted a weekly column about rural life in America and hired a woman who lived in Sag Harbor.

Kaufman’s trick is to use the origins of the play as a framing device: The actors introduce themselves as actors who have

decided to go to Wyoming to conduct interviews about the Shepard murder, even though they have grave reservations about the project. The set is a handful of bare tables—like election day at a Laramie school gym, or the first read-through of a new show at a downtown rehearsal studio. The cast is clean-cut and well-scrubbed, as if in homage to Matthew's "innocence." The eight of them play over sixty different Laramie locals, as well as themselves. They smoke. Well, actually, they don't: instead, they stick unlit cigarettes in their mouths, an image I find distractingly Clintonian but which neatly encapsulates the sanitization process. Most of the characters are hard to tell apart, but when one actor is speaking as, say, some faculty member or deputy sheriff, the rest of the octet sit watching her, their faces rapt as if in spiritual revelation. The more Kaufman tries not to condescend to his characters, the more condescending it all seems. About forty minutes in, during some speech or other, I looked at the pious, concentrated expressions on the faces of the cast and then at my fellow theatergoers. And I realized that not only were the cast excellent at playing both themselves and their dozens of characters, but they also made a much better audience than we did.

Any number of people have written about Matthew Shepard, and most of them have lapsed, with the lazy herd instinct of American journalism, into the gay-martyr routine: Frank Rich's effusions are a particularly exquisite example of the genre. The best piece on the subject I've seen was in the September 1999 *Harper's*, by JoAnn Wypijewski, a liberal who dislikes the rush to hate-speech codes and the standard formulations of Laramie residents—like the hospital spokesman who told the world that he doesn't approve of the homosexual "lifestyle," but we should all go home and hug our kids. (Kaufman uses this as his second act finale.) As with the OJ case, where *The National Enquirer* has a much better record than the high-falutin' broadsheet boys peddling their Othello metaphors, Miss Wypi-

jewski, just by getting out of the house and stretching her legs, turned up some interesting angles that eluded Rich and the other gay cheerleaders. Her line is that McKinney and Henderson were just regular all-American losers whose common or garden dormant bigotry flared into murderous rage because the guys were on a methamphetamine binge: Wyoming, she notes, has a higher per capita meth use than any other state. That's one of those small bald statistics that seems to tell you a lot more than all the hours of Kaufman's interviews. The defense had witnesses to the drug use standing by to use as mitigation in sentencing, but for the trial proper they steered clear of the drugs, figuring the "gay panic" defense would play better—that a jury would be more sympathetic to a straight guy driven nuts by some fag's touch than to a jerk off his head on meth.

Kaufman doesn't go near that. Indeed, for a "bold," "innovative," "radical" dramatist, he seems content with the same line taken by "Dateline NBC," "20/20," "48 Hours," and all the rest: how could this happen *here*, in the "heartland"? For the purposes of hate crimes, schoolyard massacres, fertilizer bombs, etc., the heartland now means anywhere west of Eighth Avenue and east of Palm Springs. So, throughout the evening, the citizens of Laramie wonder at length why this aberration should be visited upon them: how could it happen here? But it had happened here a few months before: a teenage girl was found stabbed seventeen times. Subsequently, apparently by coincidence, the mother of one of the killers was raped and tossed out of the car into the snow, where she froze to death. Kaufman doesn't mention either of these events, perhaps because they'd get in the way of the benignly traditional, grudgingly tolerant community he's determined to present.

Something very odd happened in Laramie: as the District Attorney subsequently conceded, Matthew's parents were given a right of veto over the prosecution's case and even the sentencing. The state didn't ask for

the death penalty because the Shepards decided against it. "I'm going to grant you life," as Denis Shepard told Aaron McKinney. But the price he exacted was an extraordinarily wide-ranging gag order on the killers and those who knew them. Effectively, the State of Wyoming has ceded to Mr. and Mrs. Shepard a kind of intellectual copyright over the case. You can understand why the parents of a young, gay, HIV-positive murder victim would wish to protect and control their son's posthumous image, but why a dramatist should accede to these restrictions is more puzzling. The acceptance of these limits would be disgraceful in journalism, but it's absolutely devastating in drama. The victim is a cipher, his killers are ciphers, their town is a cipher. This play is a bust, and if, as seems likely, it gets garlanded with awards, it will be a woeful comment on the state of American drama.

Still on the subject of theatricals in the heartland, *The Man Who Came To Dinner* is back at what's now officially called the American Airlines Theatre (the old Roundabout). The new marquee, though, is the

only concession to modernity. Otherwise, *Dinner* is served pretty much as usual. Like *Laramie*, it's "based on a true story": a weekend in the country with Alexander Woollcott, the top drama critic and radio star of the 'twenties era, but not the kind of house guest you'd want to be stuck with for any length of time. The light bulbs popped in Kaufman and Hart's heads and the result was a classic Broadway comedy about Sheridan Whiteside, a bullying celebrity who slips on the ice and finds himself wheelchair-bound in a drearily bourgeois midwestern home. Characters loosely and gleefully modelled on Noel Coward, Gertrude Lawrence, and Harpo Marx turn up to relieve the tedium, but what hits you most is how, in the clash between Whiteside and his Ohio hosts, Kaufman and Hart seem to skewer the differences between the coasts and the heartland far more deftly than *Laramie*. The play is pretty much director-proof, which it needs to be, given that this revival's director is Jerry Zaks. It's also star-proof, which is just as well, as Nathan Lane brings nothing to the role but a surfeit of bluster.

The splendid Chardin

by Karen Wilkin

Every time I walked through the splendid Chardin exhibition at the Metropolitan¹ this summer, I was struck by how impossible it was to imagine how this eighteenth-century master's paintings looked to his contemporaries. Not that there's a lack of documentation. Quite the contrary. The work of Jean-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779) was thoroughly discussed by the art critics of his day, most famously by Denis Diderot, his friend and perhaps his most illuminating commentator—certainly the best writer among them. The critical literature that survives from Chardin's lifetime, provoked by his submissions to the Salons from 1737 until 1779 and his widely disseminated prints, contains everything from adulatory poems and over-the-top rhapsodies to clear-eyed descriptions of particular still lifes of musical instruments, baskets of fruit, and humble kitchen objects, as well as thoughtful meditations on scenes of domesticity and images of childhood.

1 "Chardin" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on June 27, 2000 and remains on view until September 3. The exhibition was previously seen at the Grand Palais, Paris (September 7–November 22, 1999; the Kunstmuseum, Düsseldorf (December 5, 1999–February 20, 2000); and the Royal Academy of Arts, London (March 11–May 29, 2000). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Pierre Rosenberg, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum and is distributed by Yale University Press (360 pages, \$65).

Despite this diversity, there's a remarkable consistency to what eighteenth-century writers had to say about these paintings. They repeatedly praised Chardin for the truthfulness of his work to nature and its simplicity, often observing that this simplicity cost him much time and effort. They admired his gifts as a colorist and compared him favorably with the Dutch and Flemish masters of still life and genre. (The academician Nicolas de Largillière is said to have thought Chardin was a talented young Fleming when he first saw his work.) "The Teniers of our day," one enthusiast wrote, and an anonymous reviewer for *Mercure de France* in 1761 was even more extravagant: "Dutch patience has never copied nature more faithfully, no Italian genius has ever rendered it more vigorously; the combination must astonish anyone who thinks about it."

Chardin's brushwork was especially noteworthy for his eighteenth-century critics because it was so unlike that of any of his colleagues: "very rough and rugged," wrote one, "forceful," wrote another, "generally too rugged to be entirely pleasing," wrote a third, yet most of them, almost in spite of themselves, admitted that this quirky touch convincingly suggested appearances. Perhaps they were made uneasy by not knowing exactly how Chardin achieved his effects. "It is said," Diderot wrote, "that his technique is totally idiosyncratic and that he uses his thumb as much as his brush. I

don't know if this is true, but I'm sure of one thing, namely that I've never known anyone who's seen him work." But it wasn't only Chardin's technique that remained mysterious. No eighteenth-century critic seems to have been able to explain satisfyingly to himself just why these deceptively modest still lifes and genre scenes—"lesser" categories in the hierarchy of the French Academy—were so compelling, their accuracy, truth, and faithfulness notwithstanding. Diderot, who clearly learned a great deal from the studio talk of his numerous artist friends, came closest in his review of the Salon of 1767, in a celebrated passage so acute that it is worth quoting:

[Chardin's compositions] have a coloristic vigor, an overall harmony, a liveliness and truth, beautiful massing, a handling so magical as to induce despair, and an energy in their disposition and arrangement that's incredible. Back away, move in close, the illusion is the same, there's no confusion, no artificiality, no distracting flickering effects; the eye is always diverted, because calm and serenity are everywhere.

When other critics of the period tried to account for their enthusiasm for Chardin, they usually failed to provide the list of formal achievements Diderot so astonishingly unreels and fell back instead—as he does when discussing handling—on "magic." "What magic is it, what art unknown to all but you, that can cast such a spell?" asked one enraptured writer. "The searching eye . . . loses itself in the magic of your touch." Chardin's informative and generally level-headed biographer and friend Charles-Nicolas Cochin wrote of the "magic harmony by which he distinguished himself as a superior master." Even Diderot succumbed, not only in his discussion of Chardin's handling, but also in the much-quoted introduction to his Salon of 1765: "Here you are again, great magician, with your silent arrangements! How eloquently they speak to the artist!"

To present-day eyes, Chardin still looks magical and puzzling, even though it's easy to take into account his faultless sense of tone, his command of expressive massing, his mastery of unexpected color, and all the rest of his formidable arsenal of formal inventions—which is not to say that any of it is obvious, facile, or predictable. In the end, no matter how carefully we study—say—the roughly brushed blue-reds and blue-blacks, the stabbed-on flickers of gray-blue and dull green that somehow (magically!) conjure up the colors, textures, and even scent of ripe plums, we are left wondering just what makes that fictive basket of fruit so endlessly absorbing. Why are those dead rabbits so infinitely touching without being in the least sentimental? Why should the pairing of a half-seen copper cistern and a barely glimpsed figure disappearing through a doorway seem as eloquent as the most expressively choreographed pas de deux? Even Marcel Proust, after attempting to pin down the way Chardin reveals the beauty of ordinary domesticity, apologized for his presumption. Ultimately it all depends, Proust suggested, on the painter's unaccountable instinct: "Creative acts originate, in fact, not from a knowledge of their laws but from an incomprehensible and obscure power that is not fortified by being explained."

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Chardin's unfailingly surprising paintings is their unlikeness to anything we associate with the work of his contemporaries. There is none of Jean Greuze's moralizing storytelling or suggestive symbolism in Chardin's self-contained genre scenes or his still lifes. Unlike Greuze's elaborate stagings of complicated dramas, Chardin's glimpses of domestic life seem simply to recount the scrupulous observation of intimate, insignificant moments. Unlike Greuze's broken eggs and pitchers, which function as metaphors for lost virtue, Chardin's kitchen utensils and porcelain bowls, his baskets of peaches and limp hares are merely things that have been seen and savored for their visual and tactile properties. There's none of François Boucher's or Jean-Honoré Frago-

nard's flirtatious eroticism in Chardin, no celebration of the excesses of the *ancien régime*. Instead, he chronicled the pre-revolutionary virtues of the Third Estate, the sober, stable comforts and the unshakable values of the nascent bourgeoisie. Yet despite his differences from his colleagues, Chardin's work still seems irreducibly French and just as irreducibly eighteenth century. We'd never confuse one of his views of inconsequential daily life with, say, one of the Venetian genre master Pietro Longhi's charming, claustrophobic scenes of malicious intrigue. Longhi's protagonists, like those of Greuze or Fragonard, caught at telling moments in the midst of suggestive narratives, point to lives outside of the canvas. Chardin's appear to have been captured in moments of total absorption; like his still life objects, they stand for nothing but themselves, caught in an endless present, the fact of their being seen by the viewer justification enough for their existence.

Chardin was no rebel. Little is known about his early training except that he was not a product of the Academy—although he was accepted as a full member, just short of his twenty-ninth birthday, on the strength of that dazzling painting of a gutted ray, a scattering of oysters, some kitchen pots, and an intrepid kitten, now in the Louvre—one of the most audacious, prodigiously original compositions in the history of art. Chardin seems to have valued academic instruction and to have respected the hierarchies. (He wanted his son to be a history painter.) During his lifetime, in fact, his decision to concentrate on “flowers, fruit, and genre subjects”—the category of his admission to the Academy—was often interpreted as a canny career move. “Chardin limited himself to a single genre, preferring to be the best painter in a lesser category rather than to join the crowd of mediocre painters in a higher one,” wrote one of his eulogists. But what makes his pictures startling to present-day viewers is what made them startling even to his contemporaries: not their subject, but their form, which

seems to us, at it did to eighteenth-century critics, wholly unlike the norms of his day. Chardin seems to draw and paint all at once. His palpable shadows and mobile light sources have nothing to do with the careful modeling or crisp, linear structures of the work of his fellow academicians, any more than his “rough and rugged” brushstrokes resemble their sleek, “licked” surfaces. Everything in a Chardin painting seems to have been created entirely with robust brushmarks, almost as we watched, without recourse to drawn edges or schematic modeling. Eighteenth-century French virtuosi occasionally let their brushstrokes remain visible, as testaments to their speed and technical brilliance—witness the inscription “executed by M. Fragonard in the space of an hour” scrawled on the back of a portrait—but Chardin's dry, staccato touches are very different from such bravura gestures.

The materiality of Chardin's pictures is, of course, part of what makes them seem so immediate. To present-day eyes, he seems to have painted purely for the sake of painting, for the pleasure of turning the material of paint into something intensely evocative of our experience of actuality that at the same time reminds us just as intensely of the willful artifice of putting pigment on canvas. The fur of his dead hares, paradigmatic of softness and silkiness from a normal viewing distance, dissolves into a cloud of detached, multidirectional flicks of the brush, blurs of gold and white pigment when we move only a little closer; white carnations reveal themselves as clashes of crisp, seemingly random, strokes. Chardin invokes directly the experience of seeing, rather than rendering conceptually what he knows to be there. Yet in picture after picture, we find passages of color all but detached from reference: touches of red and green on the stone shelf near a glorious pyramid of wild strawberries; rose and olive blurs below a basket of fruit. These are compositional devices, not descriptive ones. Impossible to explain logically, neither reflections nor fallen petals, they are none-

theless crucial to the paintings' chromatic structure.

In Chardin's genre pictures, too, color and light similarly transcend description. In *Meal for a Convalescent* (c. 1747, National Gallery of Art, Washington), for example, a subtle play of rose, cream, and white creates rhythms almost independent of the colors' associations with such specifics as pitcher, tablecloth, or skirt. A counterpoint of illusionistic textures enhances these rhythms, but at the same time a structure of straight lines—saucepan handle, tablecloth folds, and table edge, extended by the bottom of the jacket—further diverts our attention from description, so that we momentarily forget about the nominal subject of the picture, only to return with pleasure to contemplating the essentially private, unremarkable, but seemingly overwhelmingly important moment distilled on to the canvas before us. And then back again. In another picture, we are transfixed by the stillness of a woman lost in thought and equally transfixed by the way her elegant curls have been rhymed with the evanescent scrolls of steam from her teacup.

In Chardin's still lifes, we forget even more easily about the literal identity of his subject matter. Despite his much vaunted truthfulness, he seduces us into seeing his groupings of jugs and cauldrons, of preserving jars and goblets as near-abstract, near-sculptural arrangements of diverse forms. (This is especially true of pictures in which objects are presented actual size, so that they read not as replicas of existing things, but as reinventions, at real scale, of intensely felt perceptions.) Diderot was also struck by the potency of Chardin's formal innovations, commenting on "the way one can't make things out from close up, while as one moves away the object coalesces and finally resembles nature; *and sometimes it affords as much pleasure from close up as from a distance*" (italics mine). This from a critic capable of getting so involved in one of Greuze's moral tales that he might question whether the depicted behavior of one of the protagonists was in character!

I've been trying to avoid saying this, but there seems to be no way around it: Chardin may look quintessentially French and quintessentially of his period, but at the same time, he seems—well—*modern*. Not that he intended to be. As Pierre Rosenberg says, in "The Unknowing Subversive," his excellent catalogue essay summarizing the questions surrounding perceptions of Chardin, whom he calls "the painter of contradictions, *par excellence*": "Without realizing he was doing it, he rejected his own time and opened the door to modernity"—which is why it is so difficult to envision, today, how Chardin's work appeared in his own time. For present-day viewers, no effort, no amount of research can entirely eliminate the filter of all the modernist art provoked by his example. Edouard Manet's spectacular half-length boy blowing soap bubbles, in the Gulbenkian Collection (the one with a background so materially present that it seems to devour the alert figure of the boy), is an overt homage to Chardin. So is just about any still life by Paul Cézanne. One of the earliest efforts the notoriously diffident Provençal master seems to have been pleased with was a small, slabby still life, painted with the palette knife, which he liked enough to include in the background of his portrait of his father in an armchair. The little picture's sturdy forms, its glowing greens, dull reds, and luminous darks, signal the beginning of Cézanne's lifelong conversation with Chardin—a conversation, as it turned out, not limited to still subjects. Witness the echoes of the confrontational diamond-shape and the unintelligible, fleshy folds of the gutted fish of *The Ray* (arguably the restrained, disciplined Chardin's most violent, sexually charged picture) in the curtains of Cézanne's weird allegory, *L'Eternel féminin* (c. 1877, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles) and in the ambiguous interior of the rosy shell in his *Black Clock* (c. 1870, private collection).

Henri Matisse copied *The Ray* early on, attracted, it seems, as much by its strange internal color divisions as by the bold massing of the flattened plane of the fish, the

white cloth, and the shiny black-green pottery. Chaim Soutine's ferocious paintings of poultry and fish were inspired by Chardin. Georges Braque, too, owed him an enormous debt—and not just in the vigorously stroked still lifes of unremarkable objects that engaged so much of his attention. In the 1930s and early 1940s, Braque turned briefly to what might be called genre scenes; beneath the surface complexities of these aggressively patterned interiors, with their silhouetted women, is a memory of the laconic exchange among architecture, furniture, and figures in such Chardins as *The Return from Market* (1739) or *The Diligent Mother* (1740, both Musée du Louvre).

Giorgio Morandi derived an entire series of pictures of roses in a narrow necked vase from Chardin's unique version of the subject: the masterly bouquet in a Delft vase, thought to have been painted around 1755 (in the National Gallery of Scotland). Morandi's models were paper roses, so it's not surprising that his painted flowers have none of the magical (there's that word again) freshness of Chardin's; instead they are dusty, dry, as though bleached by Italian light. Of course, Morandi's lifetime scrutiny of the infinitely changing relationships of a set of banal objects on a neutral surface can itself be seen as indebted to Chardin. And more. Marsden Hartley's graphically silhouetted hanging ducks and crows are the direct descendants of Chardin's iconic mallards, just as Pierre Bonnard's sumptuous bowls of fruit and scatterings of domestic crockery, rendered in densely layered, "unreal," acutely evocative hues, can trace their ancestry to his compatriot's piles of peaches, his glistening plums (suggested by the driest of pigments), his translucent grapes. And am I the only person to sense some correspondence between the delicate outstretched hind legs of Chardin's upside-down rabbits and the splayed legs of Edgar Degas's scated dancers? The list seems endless.

What links these diverse modernists to their distinguished ancestor is their common faith in the importance of using per-

ception as the basis for invention. Pierre-Jean Mariette, one of the few eighteenth-century writers immune to Chardin's excellences, observed that he was "obliged to keep constantly before his eyes the object he intends to paint." It wasn't a compliment. Chardin worked from nature because, Mariette believed, he was "lacking in draughtsmanship and unable to execute preparatory studies on paper." (Mariette did, however, make an interesting connection between Chardin and the Le Nain brothers, although again he intended no compliment.) Academic training (which Chardin lacked) was designed to produce history painters who were able to stage elaborate dramas offering elevated messages, enacted by large figures in complicated poses, and arranged according to geometric principles of order and proportion. "Merely" replicating what was seen—a charge levelled against Caravaggio by his high-minded contemporaries more than a century earlier—was deemed too easy (which is why portrait painting, although further up the ladder than still life or even genre, was considered less significant than history painting). Musicians of Chardin's period were similarly expected to compose according to rules of harmony, theory, and form, without trying things out on the piano. Chardin was unabashedly a perceptual painter whose biographers recounted, as a pivotal moment in his career, his early discovery that working directly from the motif could be an end, not simply a means; his nineteenth-century champions, the Goncourt brothers, declared "Chardin paints everything that he sees." Yet the painter himself famously said that artists must "forget what they see." His work may have been based on perceptions, but his pictures were far from being meticulous catalogues of factual details.

Obviously, Chardin was enthusiastically appreciated for his merits in his own life time. Like many of his French contemporaries, he was virtually forgotten after his death, to be suddenly and rapidly acclaimed once again, when he was rediscovered in the

mid-1840s by critics such as Champfleury, Théophile Gautier, and Thoré-Bürger (who was also instrumental in reclaiming Vermeer after his long eclipse). Twenty years later, in 1863, he was firmly established as a great master by the pioneering scholarly writings of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt. (The Goncourts' essay, republished in their book on French eighteenth-century painters, was the point of departure for all future monographs until 1933, when Georges Wildenstein's publication, since revised, became the standard work.) Nineteenth-century vanguard painters looked attentively at Chardin, as they did at Vermeer, fascinated by this "new" old master who seemed to have anticipated so many of their concerns. Perhaps the most provocative result of this attention is the subtle reverberation of a pair of Chardin's still lifes, *The Jar of Apricots* (1758, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto) and the related oval, *The Cut Melon* (1760, private collection), in Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergère* (1881–82, Courtauld Institute Galleries, London). The stunning parade of like and unlike glass and china objects (some oddly doubled), the looming, hefty jar of dark fruit, and the pile of toothsome peaches in Chardin's pictures have strange cognates in the groups of bottles, the implausible reflections, the dish of peaches, and even in the dark, cylindrical figure of the barmaid in Manet's compelling, discomfiting picture. (I don't think I am fantasizing; both the oval Chardins were in the celebrated sale of the Marcille collection, in 1876, so Manet could easily have known them.)

Not all of Chardin's paintings are "magical," of course. Some look suspiciously as if they were produced only to satisfy demand. But the truly magical ones are extraordinary indeed and a remarkable number of them were at the Metropolitan this summer. Some iconic paintings, such as *The Brioche* (1763, Musée du Louvre) are, alas, absent, while no pastels are included, having been pronounced too fragile to travel, which eliminated those unflinching, but tender

portraits of the artist and his wife. But the show still provided multiple delights: the works themselves, the halo of their descendants, and the way they made us think about the whole enterprise of painting.

The exhibition also triggered recollections of the last comprehensive Chardin show, the stunning, still vivid in my mind exhibit mounted by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1979 to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of the painter's death. (The recent show celebrated the three-hundredth anniversary of the artist's birth in 1699.) Why then, the catalogue of the show at the Met asks, another Chardin exhibition, apart from the delight of seeing the work? Because twenty years of the "new art history" have provoked new evaluations and interpretations of his work. There is a full list of the Chardin literature since 1979 in the catalogue's bibliography, and it is all provocatively summarized and evaluated in a thoughtful essay by Colin Bailey, weighing the pros and cons of the arguments proposed of such contemporary art historians as Michael Fried, Norman Bryson, Thomas Crow, and Michael Baxandall. The catalogue also includes entries for exhibited pictures that often expand and correct earlier information, plus essays discussing thorny issues such as "Chardin and Illusion" and offering interesting details on the ceramic and glass objects in his paintings, his finances, and the role of prints of his work published in his lifetime on his reputation. (Moralizing, explicatory captions were frequently added to the prints, although it is not known what Chardin thought about the practice or about the captions themselves.) The color reproductions are predictably disappointing and muddy, although the occasional enlargement of a detail manages to convey some sense of Chardin's touch.

For once, the hackneyed phrase "painter's painter" seems entirely accurate. Chardin's astonishing pictures seem at once to sum up definitively the possibilities of allusive painting and to suggest that its implications have not yet been exhausted. But in the end,

words seem both wholly inadequate and entirely unreliable. Roger Fry warned us about this in 1932, in *Characteristics of French Art*: “Indeed anyone who has experienced the elation and despair which comes from the attempt to express their feelings about vision in oil paint will know that it is impossible for him to speak with complete judicial impartiality about Chardin.” The same holds true for anyone who has experienced the elation and despair of trying to write about those feelings.

Exhibition note

“Alice Neel” at the
Whitney Museum of American Art.
June 29–September 17, 2000

Among her many supporters, Alice Neel (1900–1984) is revered as a bohemian and a proto-feminist who, like Louise Bourgeois, achieved fame and distinction late in life after many years spent working in obscurity. It seems to me, then, a poignant irony that the Neel most likely to survive in the art historical imagination is not the chronicler of bohemianism, the Neel who early on painted Joe Gould with three penises and who in her eighties painted herself in the nude, but the painter of “suits,” the Neel who painted the *Fuller Brush Man* (1965) and *Walter Gutman* (1965). Indeed, the painting of Neel’s that strikes me most forcefully is *Richard in the Era of the Corporation* (1979), a shockingly titled portrait of the artist’s son in suit and tie, sitting with legs crossed in a vaguely modernist chair set in front of a mirror. Richard’s face appears twice: once in three-quarter profile, facing the viewer with an air of wariness, and again reflected in the mirror in side profile with a stern, almost angry expression. That Neel could use her son as the subject of such an accurate, and richly complicated, satire that evinces both harsh familial judgment and an attentive motherly eye, is astonishing.

Richard in the Era of the Corporation is not, however, included in “Alice Neel,” the

large traveling exhibit on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art through September 17. One could have seen the painting two years ago at the Cheim & Read Gallery in a brilliantly insightful show called “Alice Neel: Men in Suits,” which, with its tight focus, succeeded in highlighting the most compelling part of Neel’s oeuvre. By contrast, the Whitney exhibit, curated by Ann Temkin, trots out a range of work that succeeds mainly in proving how uneven a painter Neel was. For those, like Temkin, bent on puffing up the myth of Neel as a great idiosyncratic artist, kept down by the fact of her sex and her unwillingness to swim in such mainstream currents as abstraction, her suited men must seem almost entirely beside the point. Temkin casts Neel in a role that takes the artist from outsider to artist who came in from the cold by making a series of portraits of art-world plutocrats and thereby achieved the fame that allowed her to come into her own as a feminist artist, painting such figures as Faith Ringgold, Marisol, Annie Sprinkle, and her own aged self. Unfortunately, this story inadvertently emphasizes Neel’s all-too-evident weaknesses, which puts a real damper on the triumphant tale it’s meant to tell.

Neel rarely managed to assimilate or control an eclectic (some might say irreconcilable) gaggle of influences: expressionism, as in *T. B. Harlem* (1940) and the early watercolors; social realism, as in *Investigation of Poverty at the Russell Sage Foundation* (1935); a sort of heavy-handed symbolism, as in *Kenneth Fearing* (1935) or *Symbols* (1933); and American naïve art, as in *Hartley on the Rocking Horse* (1943). What held these influences together, and what gave them a certain unity, was Neel’s dedication to an aesthetics of ugliness, which, when tempered by the demands of her subject matter, as with her men in suits, could have great satiric power. Yet far too often her delight in ugliness resulted in slapdash caricature or stilted comic-strip renderings. *Frank O’Hara, No. 2* (1960) draws out the poet-curator’s imperfections to such a degree as to turn him into a monster—a silly-

looking monster whose hands come from a cartoon and whose face grins out from a B-movie horror flick. Even in a straight portrait like *Henry Geldzahler* (1967), Neel can't quite rein in her competing impulses. She gets the likeness, but, by giving the enthusiastic curator a dour expression surmounted by impishly rosy cheeks, Neel turns her sitter into a cipher, an inert illustration. In *Nancy and Olivia* (1967), she depicts her daughter-in-law and granddaughter as cartoon characters afflicted by hyperthyroidism. But, *Faith Ringgold* (1977) has a convincing heft and an almost Matissean attention to color and pattern.

In the end, one can't help feeling that

Neel's talents were ill-suited to her favored subjects. Given her Otto Dix-like talent for expressionist satire, she had too much sympathy for her bohemian sitters and was too much the supplicant with her art-world subjects. Still, Neel stuck to the tradition of portraiture even when it garnered little respect or cachet, and in her finest work she attained a potent satiric mix of affection and criticism that has few analogues in twentieth-century American art. The Whitney overstates the case for Neel as a major artist. She wasn't. A minor painter, in the best sense of the term, Neel deserves a smaller, more discerning, and therefore more honest assessment of her contribution.

—Daniel Kunitz

Editor's note: We wish to call our readers' attention to the publication of *Six Mile Mountain: Poems*, by Richard Tillinghast (Story Line Press, \$13.95), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

Two princes & a mock Tudor

by Laura Jacobs

Neither American Ballet Theatre nor the New York City Ballet did anything millennial for their Spring 2000 seasons at Lincoln Center, and that's a blessing, because neither American Ballet Theatre nor the New York City Ballet is in a position to do anything definitive right now. American Ballet Theatre is deep into blockbuster mentality—a kind of denial, really—whereby we get week after week of full-length story ballets (five *Taming of the Shrews*, for example, followed by eight *La Bayadères*), long stretches separated by two to three days of under-rehearsed repertory programs. Across the plaza, NYCB looks just joyless, as if the strain of survival in a boom-rich, arts-fickle New York, plus the monumental legacy of George Balanchine, is too oppressive a load to cart into the next century. ABT is bottom-heavy and ramshackle; NYCB is thin and rattled. At both, top-tier female dancers are aging or injured, with no great push coming up from underneath, and day-to-day performance has all the consistency of a marble in a pinball machine.

For the past few seasons, the light—the *tilt!*—at Lincoln Center has come from two young men at ABT: Ethan Stiefel, an elegant Apollonian blond, and Angel Corella, a boyish brunette with a burning happiness onstage. Like Hamlet and Fortinbras, both are princes, but physically, chemically different. Cast in the same roles on different nights, facing the same challenges, these

two have been the show within a show at ABT, a match game score-for-score. Who'll dominate in *Push Comes to Shove*? Who in *Billy the Kid*? It's the best kind of competition, not only because it is an even match (in the days when Mikhail Baryshnikov technically outstripped all the other men there were no even matches), but also because both dancers have innate taste. Neither guy wants to win ugly, so everybody wins.

Stiefel was produced by the School of American Ballet and rose to principal dancer at New York City Ballet, a young man with musical daring and a rapier technique, going for the big moves. He has a clear line like a quill pen in a beautiful hand moving across the page—a graceful continuity even though he has a rather tight-knit physique. His *i*'s are dotted, his *t*'s all crossed, and Lord his toes are pointed! Stiefel left NYCB meticulously finished, yet the finish never got the better of the phrase. He was a golden boy, with round baby blues much like Baryshnikov's but a lighter, sweeter touch—something between Leonardo DiCaprio and early Brad Pitt.

Stiefel joined ABT in 1997, already refined. Angel Corella came into the company with more bottom on him (literally and figuratively), two years before Stiefel. A corps dancer in Spain, he was spotted in a ballet competition in Paris (spinning no doubt) and was taken up by ABT, who promptly dropped him into Balanchine's *Theme and*

Variations, the ABT rite of passage in which all men-with-potential get dropped like fledglings over a choppy sea. It's fly or swim or sink—flying's best. Corella was a little chunky in those days, a little thick through the leg, but so game, so charmingly eager to please, and to please through dancing. Watching him *not* let go of a multiple pirouette, hanging on to the spin while losing his center, I thought: another tousle-haired tornado! I preferred Vladimir Malakhov, who also joined ABT in 1995, a dancer of long-limbed articulation and feral glow.

But there is no second-guessing desire, especially when it is buttressed by discipline. And it's easier to improve alignment than it is to amp up the passion (again, Baryshnikov's a case in point: he never could make his perfection look passionate; the harder he tried, the stagier he got). Corella was making the right choice, and by his third year at ABT his technique was catching up with his heart. The arrival of Stiefel didn't hurt.

The two dancers first went memorably head to head in 1998, in the company's production of *Le Corsaire*. A Maryinsky-vintage piece of ballet exotica (beautiful slave girls are sold in the square, then rescued by their pirate boyfriends, etc.), *Le Corsaire* is today a choreographic hodgepodge that contains priceless nuggets of Petipa—one of them the iconographic *Corsaire* pas de deux, the slave-and-lady dance that famously framed Rudolf Nureyev for the public eye. Performing it with tea-finger Margot Fonteyn, he flexed, he coiled, he threw himself in spasm at her feet. It was Russia wowing the West, Rudi bent on arousal, slave to the audience (and enslaving the audience in return). Stiefel, however, likes to give contained, structured performances, and he danced the role with gleaming self-effacement, a dark gleam, making of himself a burnished totem. Corella compressed even further, curling deeper, kneeling lower. But more trusting of abandon, he opened at the top, let himself tear loose in quick synaptic riptides. Stiefel brought the house down. Corella carried it away.

In spring 1999 all eyes were on the ABT revival of *Push Comes to Shove*, Twyla Tharp's 1976 hit vehicle for Baryshnikov, a role for him to show off in. It's a curious piece, a portrait of Misha that's really a portrait of ABT's dependence on Misha as an attraction, an energy source, a bright, sharp focus. Tharp showed a certain disdain for the women around him; they're dippy, kooky, wobble-bodied. He's the crack smart-ass, and also "beauty like a tightened bow." The man who steps into this role must have the reverb of that bow, and be the arrow too. He has to be taut, shooting, heightened at once, otherwise the jokes don't fly. My money was on Stiefel.

But it was Corella who had the edge. Stiefel danced *Push* like a long classical variation (albeit one with snotty asides), giving every step 100 percent, fully stretched, fully pointed, and wearing himself out fast by holding on too hard, not winging along. It was a heroic performance in which Stiefel's good faith got in the way. *Push* is to some extent a bad-faith ballet. It's energies are those of the stand-up comic: aggressive, anti-social, out of control. This guy (a far cry from Rudi in *Corsaire*) uses the audience as a reflection in which to check his hair (and then he gives the audience an "up yours"). Corella—relaxed, class-clownish, but zapping the steps—rode his own virtuosity like it was something silly. It was the best *Push* since Misha. And more fun.

The next face-off was *Billy the Kid*, Eugene Loring's back-pocket masterpiece of 1938, a brilliant collaboration with Aaron Copland, who turned in a haunted score that cleared space for a haunting ballet. *Billy* has been out of the ABT rep for quite some time, permission revoked, I heard, because ABT performances were not up to snuff, but it was back in October 1999, part of the fall season at City Center. "*Billy* is about the West as it is dreamed of," the critic Edwin Denby wrote in 1943, "as it is imagined by boys playing in empty lots in the suburbs of our cities." The make-believe of kids playing is on a continuum with the make-believe of ballet.

Little Billy sustains big performances because he's like Don Giovanni—the one with the energy, the one you root for. But the energy has to stay sharply inside the stylized lines, resonating (the dandy costumes are eye-popping black-and-white stripes, then little-kid stars). Corella tends to be more rapt than concentrated. He's riveted to the stage world around him, hearing, seeing, and as Billy he kicked into the role with his little black boots, his big brown eyes innocent of his own brutality. It was a jangly portrayal, as if Corella's spurs were loose (his cowboy hat really was loose, slipping down over those puppy eyes), but held together by charisma. In this ballet, though, charisma doesn't beat concentration. Stiefel sank into Billy as if it were a character role, affecting a bow-legged walk and a bitter grimace. His Billy was a conscious killer, heavy with hate—a risky path on Stiefel's part, a fine line between character and cartoon, but it was the right line, his portrayal having the impacted power of Philip Guston's one-eyed wedges. And then there was the tenderness he brought to the dance in the desert, when Billy is thinking of his sweetheart (who is an echo of his mother). Billy is alone, imagining, so Stiefel performs the entire duet looking always beyond his partner, and suddenly Billy is weightless, as if he's dancing with the stars in the back-drop. It's a glimpse behind the mask, unbearably sad. Harsh strokes and exquisite calibration—Stiefel's was the best Billy I've ever seen.

The fascinating thing about Stiefel and Corella is that their side-by-side ascent has galvanized them at a time when other ABT principals are looking undirected, lost, or "lite." Vladimir Malakhov, gifted, vivid in his first years with the company, has somehow marginalized himself, giving performances of empty elegance, his phosphorescence on the fritz. His gala night performance of the *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*, the Balanchine show-stopper, set the tone. He danced it bouncing like a baby, as if it were Bournonville, as wrong as wrong can

be. Where is his coach? Does he have one? Julie Kent, once a dancer of delicacy and moonlight, has gotten grande dame-ish, exerting a Margot Fonteyn-like pretty-pretty reign over the repertory, and giving herself airs by dancing roles she has no business putting a foot in, like the season's first week *Theme and Variations*. Kent was a shambles—slow, blurred, hoisted around by her poor partner, not strong or sharp enough to cut the crystal. Mid-season she practically walked through *Lilac Garden*, once one of her most glowing roles. And by the final week's *Manon* pas de deux with Julio Bocca, she was cheating with a lot of head and neck action, lascivious glances flashed at the audience. Manon is slippery and Kent is square, a dancer boxed-in by her correctness and pleased to be in that box, getting boxier with every year. She needs to trade her airs for oxygen.

And Ashley Tuttle. This dancer has been slow to blossom, so slow she always strikes me as older than she is. She has the older dancer's love of adagio, and in the slow spells of *La Bayadère* or *Giselle* or *Theme and Variations* she's like a white goldfish drifting, lilting, alone in a glass globe. Her soul bubble is wonderful, and then suddenly it's not, she's too far away. It doesn't help that she's pinched through the hips, especially on the right side, and so lacks freedom, swing, getting her legs up and around. She's too young to be so circumscribed. Is it an injury, bad training? Tuttle has a ballerina's wayward sense of invention, but her technical problems tamp down her impact, holding her to a middling scale, more soloist than star.

As for Stiefel and Corella this spring, Stiefel—wearing a feather and turquoise harem pants as Ali, the slave in *Le Corsaire*—graced the billboards out front of the Met, but he was out for the entire season with mononucleosis. And Corella—I'm not surprised—was lackluster. It began on the first night, the gala, when he danced the *Corsaire* pas de deux and finished his phrases with that hard hand-snap of dispatch. That snap is running rampant through ABT, a

coarse punctuation that may feel necessary in the cavernous Met space (it's not), and is also a covering tactic for dancers tired or just plain weak (it covers nothing). Feet flap, fouettés falter, pirouettes go "pffft," but the dancers meet the end of the phrase like snapping banners—"I did it!"—even though they didn't. It was disconcerting to see Corella selling *Corsaire*, but in every Corella performance I saw this season—as James in *La Sylphide*, as Solor in *La Bayadère*, even as the Lover in *Lilac Garden*—he put a weird whippy finish on his phrases. It's hard not to feel that Stiefel's sterling sensibility holds Corella to a higher standard of refinement, just as Corella's bliss in virtuosity is a spur for Stiefel. It has always been said that ABT dancers have to do it themselves. It is lately said, as well, that a lot of ABT coaching is now done "by compliment," meaning the principals get more coddling than criticism. We all know where that leads. It leads to Julie Kent making mash of *Theme* (or even being in *Theme*), to Paloma Herrera dancing the *Corsaire* pas de deux as if she were in a circus, center ring. It leads to dancing that doesn't look like a product of anything, or in the plaintive words of a fellow critic, "They have no kinetic depth."

The new *Swan Lake* that the artistic director Kevin McKenzie staged and premiered this season, a 1.5 million-dollar baby, is certainly attractive with its Roseville colors, its Rookwood trees. It's also up-to-date, with borrowings from Matthew Bourne's Broadway version of *Swan Lake*, including Bourne's stress on sexual thrall-dom (in McKenzie's act III, von Rothbart openly seduces the visiting princesses). And I liked the shock-lit Frankenstein landscape of act IV, a minute of originality. Otherwise, this *Swan Lake* is all set and no sensibility, with nothing palpably ABT about it. And something palpable is exactly the point. *Swan Lake*, perhaps more than any other ballet, is about kinetic logic, which is the life-force of a ballet company, a systemic poetic force coursing through all its shapes and forms. Unlike the Kirov or the Royal or

the Bolshoi (which even at extremely low ebb, as the company was in its visit this summer, still works as one with that turned-in, high-hearted push); unlike NYCB where the issue of kinetic logic—how a dancer moves, how the company dances—is one of the crucial aesthetic issues of our time; unlike these great companies, ABT does not have a school feeding into the corps and is therefore not coherent from the ground up. Company class, coaches, and critically-attuned choreography must face these aesthetic differences, must forge, at least, an ethic, a standard.

In a long career, George Balanchine never stopped commenting on the innate laziness of the human body, how with dancers you had to "start pushing them and scream at them to make them more alive." It was high praise to be "not bad." Antony Tudor, the choreographer who made masterpieces for ABT during his long association with the company, whose ballets sound the deepest chords in ABT history, was notoriously blunt and manipulative with dancers, his mind games the stuff of lore. He did not choreograph or coach by compliment. What would Tudor say if he saw this season's performances of his ballet *Jardin aux Lilas* (*Lilac Garden*)? ABT used to be definitive in Tudor.

Jardin aux Lilas was choreographed and premiered in England in 1936, and in 1940 was acquired by ABT (then called Ballet Theatre) for the company's first season. The ballet takes place in a garden, at a farewell party where a young woman, Caroline, will see her Lover one last time before she enters into a marriage of convenience. Her future husband and his former mistress are also at the party. So simple a plot, and yet *Jardin aux Lilas* is one of the most complex ballets ever choreographed—a pas de quatre inside a panorama.

The pictorial plane of Tudor's stage is like no one else's and reflects his turn-of-the-century sensibility, his roots in Edwardian England, when life still seemed to flow by horizontally (it was flowing toward a

trench). Like Alfred Tennyson, an earlier A. T., Tudor is a poet of loss—lost love, lost idealism, sometimes lost life—and he uses his corps like lines in a slow rolling ballad, sending them across the stage in unison, their port de bras a curving rhyme of alignment. And he sends them across in waves, so they suggest the sweep, the passage, of time. (From Tennyson's *In Memoriam*: "Our little systems have their day;/ They have their day and cease to be:/ They are but broken lights of thee,/ And thou, O Lord, art more than they.")

Against this pictorial flow, four fates rise and fall in high relief: Tudor moves the four leads upstage and down, perpendicular to the panorama, releasing them into another dimension. He also gives them intimacy, immediacy, by stopping them in tableaux—an embrace, a reach, a rest—a frieze of emotion. This is melodrama, not unlike the party in *Now, Voyager* (1942) when Bette Davis and Paul Henreid are webbed across the room by glances only. The four dancers must project this kind of drama, but with their bodies, their backs. Tudor helps them by keeping their port de bras low. *Battement*, *jeté*, *sissonne*—these explosive moves are performed with arms down at the sides, hands below shoulders and often below waists. Tudor suggests the straitlaced decorum of the time, the stillness and quiet eloquence of bust, shoulders, head. "He didn't want the arms to distract," the ballerina Melissa Hayden, who learned the ballet from Tudor, told me after one performance this season. If the arms are down, the dancers must lift and lead with their hearts, which takes a pliant spine, and strength, push, through the pelvis.

Tudor cannot be tossed off. In this way he is different from Balanchine, who liked to see dancers fly, shooting from the hip. As Hayden said, "Tudor is like a painting." She meant the lines had to be where Tudor put them, the dancers in sync musically and spatially, rehearsed to the nth degree. At the same time—like Balanchine—Tudor wanted large-scale performance from his dancers, bodies passionate in space, covering ground. "You have to dance Tudor full out," his former assistant Airi Hynninen told *Ballet Review* in 1995. "When an arabesque droops, so does the spirit."

I saw three of the season's performances of *Jardin*, one in the first week, one mid-season, and a matinée at season's end. It was as if ABT was rehearsing the ballet onstage. The first performance was shocking for its lack of cohesion, its droopiness and dropped details (Caroline's distinct goodbye to each guest, for instance). The second performance was better—clearer but still wan. By the last performance, the lines were holding, it was *Jardin aux Lilas*, taut and teeming with details, the stillnesses more powerful, the music, Chausson's *Poème*, sounding new-minted (Tudor's sensory genius is such that his compositional clarity seems to crystallize the music, don't ask me how). This last was the performance Melissa Hayden saw, and she judged it a dishonor to Tudor: it was still too messy, and the dancing—and consequently the emotions—too small. But I was thankful for the improvement, moved by the "little system" that did come through, the twilight, and more than ever baffled as to how ABT could treat this heart-stopping ballet—sixty years in its repertory!—like second-hand goods.

Music

The other Rota

by John Simon

For some, he merely wrote the score of *The Godfather*. For the slightly more knowledgeable, he composed all the best Fellini scores. For the still better informed, he also provided many other directors with scores, and was one of our finest film composers. But only the elite knows him as also a true and important classical composer of some 300 works including instrumental, chamber, symphonic, and sacred music, songs, and operas. He is the Milanese Nino Rota (1911–1979), and the name, Italian for “wheel,” suited one who smoothly glided from one kind of music to another.

Most reference works, like the big new *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, ignore him; only recently have others caught on (e.g., *The Oxford Dictionary of Opera*: “unabashedly tuneful and direct in appeal”). Confusion reigns: the *Grove Dictionary of Opera* lists ten Rota operas, the *Harvard Biographical Dictionary of Music* eleven. Some are short and intended for radio, though they have been staged. Rota composed about 140 film scores, four ballets (including the amusingly titled *Le Molière imaginaire* for Maurice Béjart), with a fifth expanding the film music for *La Strada*. The *Harvard Dictionary* mentions three symphonies, overlooking a fourth, and so, bedevilingly, on.

There are concertos for piano, harp, trombone, cello, and bassoon; cantatas, one with the jaunty title *Rabelaisiana*; three masses; and other sacred choral works. Only some have been recorded; much has

not even been catalogued, notably late, unfinished pieces; at his death at age sixty-eight, Rota was still going strong.

Nino Rota, whose baptismal name was Giovanni, was a wunderkind. His grandfather, Giovanni Rinaldi, was a well-known composer-pianist; his mother, Ernesta, an accomplished pianist, started him on the piano when he was four. At eight, he began composing. At ten, on his father's death, he composed the oratorio *The Childhood of St. John the Baptist*, performed in Milan in 1923, and later in France, where it was greeted with enthusiasm. His first attempt at opera (*The Swineherd Prince*, 1925–6) never got beyond the short score. At that time Rota, who had been taught by, among others, Ildebrando Pizzetti, moved to study at Rome's Conservatory of St. Cecilia under Alfredo Casella, graduating with a diploma in composition in 1929. Toscanini helped him get a grant at the Curtis Institute, where he studied composition with Rosario Scalero and conducting with Fritz Reiner.

There, too, he befriended Aaron Copland and Samuel Barber and renewed contact with Gian Carlo Menotti, to whose mother Mamma Ernesta once remarked, “My Nino will be the new Beethoven, and your Gian Carlo will be the new Mascagni,” putting an end to the ladies' friendship. In Philadelphia and, later, New York, Rota encountered the American song tradition, the movies, and Gershwin. Grafting these elements onto the tradition of Italian opera and song was “to

contribute to the formation of his own idiom,” as Giordano Montecchi noted. Returning to Milan University, Rota earned an arts degree with a thesis on a Renaissance musical theorist. The Rota wheel was busily rotating forward and backward.

Rota the man and the musician were closely related, as were, in the composer, the classical and the film music creator. Lilliana Betti wrote in her book *Fellini*, “Nino: short, always involved in a distraction that has become his habitual existential state. The sole human signals that Nino transmits from his dimension, i.e., music, are movements having the dreamy vagueness of an unconscious man, a dialogue with frequent rhythms and reasons impermeable to anyone else, a look with the disconcerting firmness of innocence.” She also described the hallucinatory disorder of his apartment.

Fellini recalled a funny little man who thought that a minute contains one-hundred seconds, and that twenty hours was ten P.M., which made him miss trains and planes. He could not drive or take a snapshot, and considered those who could magicians. Fellini further evoked the “slightly bewitched” air of this “mild, gentle, always smiling man, who tried to exit through doors that weren’t there.” But, in “*Il amico magico*,” he continued, “When the occasion arose, and even when it didn’t, he said the acutest, most profound things, and uttered opinions of impressive exactitude about people and things.”

In her book *I, Fellini*, Charlotte Chandler quoted the director on how he met Rota.

Outside Cinecittà [the film studio], I noticed a funny little man waiting in the wrong place for the tram. He seemed happily oblivious of everything. I felt compelled . . . to wait with him. . . . I was certain that the tram would stop in its regular place and we would have to run for it, and he was equally certain it would stop where he was standing. . . . To my surprise, the tram did stop right in front of us.

This was the kind of miracle Rota could make happen in his music as well.

Music came easily to him. He excelled at improvising at the piano, which endeared him to Fellini, himself a great improviser. At the keyboard, Fellini would hum something that Rota turned into an immortal theme, like that of Gelsomina, the pathetic waif of *La Strada*. It became, John Baxter wrote in his *Fellini*, “one of the most famous of all film themes. The first recording alone sold two million copies.” As Rota told Betti, “Federico and I complete the music for a film so quickly that it’s better to keep the speed a secret. . . . Federico would even prefer that I didn’t waste time jotting down what we’ve worked out. However, experience has taught him that I can forget a theme as fast as I’ve found it.”

Fellini also commented on Rota’s wonderful disposition and modesty. It made Rota take on in 1937 a job nobody else wanted at the Paisiello Institute in Taranto, in Italy’s heel. Two years later, he worked his way fifty miles north to the more respectable Bari Conservatory, whose director he became in 1950. He held this post until his death in 1979, “exercising it,” as Carlo Cavalletti noted, “with a dedication and affection that made him decline the selfsame job at Rome’s Santa Cecilia,” a vastly more prestigious and remunerative position.

How to define in words the essence of Rota’s music, either classical or cinematic—not that the two were all that different. Riccardo Muti, Rota’s student at Bari, conducts the Scala Philharmonic on a disc (Sony 66279) that includes the ballet version of *La Strada* and the dances from *The Leopard*. This movie music proves nowise inferior to the beautiful classical work, the Concerto for Strings, sandwiched in between.

What then are the salient musical characteristics? Just as the man Rota was an innocent largely inhabiting a private dream world, yet also emerging from it with shrewd perceptions, so the composer shuttled between dreamy, even sentimental, tunes full of bittersweet yearning (which I’ll call Mode A) and tongue-in-cheek, impishly frolicsome marching melodies (Mode B).

Listening to Mode A, you float with Rota between rapture and tears, in a mood of romantic longing, of a sweetness almost unbearably intense, made even more precious by a premonition of transience.

Mode B is part march, part quick dance, and very large part circus parade of clowns, artistes, and artful animals. The harmonies and instrumentation are jazzy, with a winking syncopation—conspiratorial roguishness or impudent braggadocio. There are quick shifts from concerto to ripieno, and irreverent changes of tempo, and, with them, dizzying switches between the modes. Often the two coexist, as one part of the orchestra is in A, the other in B. Melancholy creeps in from nowhere, only to metamorphose into urchinish insolence. In a twinkling, an assertive tutti yields to a yearning violin solo or to a rataplan of percussion, yet things do not fly apart: sighs or joyous shouts, the language remains Rota.

Weaving in and out of the modes, there is a shy hope bridging them. Heartbreak turns into carnival, loss into fresh questing. Take the end of Fellini's *Notti di Cabiria*. The prostitute-heroine having been nearly killed for her money by the one man she thought truly loved her, staggers on toward a country road where a group of youthful revelers dances past her until, smiling through her tears, she joins the hop-skip-ping horde. Again, the end of *8 1/2*, where the film's characters unite in a circusy round galop on an otherwise deserted beach—a veritable dance of life.

Irwin Bazelon, himself a composer of both art and film music, wrote in *Knowing the Score*:

Nino Rota achieves total integration of his scores into Fellini's films by playing against the picture and not piling similar textures on top of one another. In *8 1/2*, for example, the stylistic difference between Fellini's abstract images and Rota's score gives a kind of formal structure and continuity to a film whose brilliant staging and shooting techniques often seem undisciplined and desultory. Many of *8 1/2*'s cues stand on their own as pieces of

music (*divertimenti*) that can be performed apart from the screen: in particular the opening carnival music "La passerella di Otto e mezzo" and the charming "Carlotta's Galop," which is a marvelous parody of Khachaturian's *Saber Dance*.

Let us begin our examination of Rota's concert music with his piano pieces. For the grandson of a famous pianist-composer, Nino wrote relatively little for solo piano. Even so, the Rota essence is there, well captured on two equally fine CDs, by Angela Annese (Sarx Records 006) and Danielle Laval (Auvidis Valois 4698). Though Laval's sound may be ampler, Annese includes some lesser works, with transcriptions from the opera *I due timidi* of particular interest.

Take *Ippolito gioca*, by the nineteen-year-old Rota, written about Pizzetti's son playing some childish game. In ninety-three seconds from Annese or seventy-two from Laval (whose faster tempos work better in the dazzling pieces, as here, than in the more feelingful ones), a child's game is conveyed without sentimentality or condescension, all lightness and brio. *Variations and Fugue on the Name of Bach* is fourteen lively, elegantly varied pieces where, avoiding all facility, Rota merely gives his classical hat a slightly rakish tilt. The concluding fugue finds him at his neoclassical best.

Fifteen Preludes (1964) is Rota at his most spirited, various, and mature. Take the second of these miniatures, whose very tempo, *allegro, ma espressivo e delicato*, is highly characteristic. In a mere eighty-odd seconds, here is that Mode-A Rota yearning—not sugary, backward-harking nostalgia, but aspiration to a sweetness too often lacking from both music and life. In No. 5, there is all the jovial bustle that epitomizes Mode B. Next, the whimsically titled *Seven Difficult Pieces for Children* of 1971. Enchantingly lighthearted, they are *difficile* enough to stretch the skill of the *bambini*. The essence of Rota's piano prowess is encapsulated in *Two Waltzes on the Name of Bach*, which in about three-and-a-half minutes perfectly embodies Modes A and B;

at Fellini's request, it became the mechanical-bird leitmotif in the movie *Casanova*.

What emerges from the piano pieces, as from all of Rota's works, is an indifference to prevailing musical fashions. When most other leading Italian composers were "modernists," Rota remained an independent traditionalist, but not an epigone. As his ex-student Muti reminisced:

Those were the years when musical composition, trailing behind a model that was taken up as an absolute benchmark (the so-called Second Viennese School), conformed to it as if it were the only possible and acceptable way of doing things. They were years of downright dictatorship, implicated in which were musical agents, musicologists, critics and performers (but, unsurprisingly, not the public), who endorsed works of value (few) and outrages (many) in the name of whatever fell into the categories of experimentation, novelty, or *engagement*. Rota, accused of being old-fashioned, always stayed nobly above these arguments . . . in the certainty of his own *métier*, his own kind of music.

Yet it should be noted that such cutting-edge composer-conductors as Goffredo Petrassi and Bruno Maderna conducted, sometimes indeed premiered, Rota's works.

We find this being above the fray again in a disc of piano-and-violin and piano-and-violin music (Dynamic 211). Though highly civilized, these works are mostly unexciting, except for the lovely Intermezzo for Viola and Piano (1945), which the pianist Marco Vincenzi finds reminiscent of Bartók's "arch form." More satisfying is *Chamber Music for Flute* (Dynamic 172), which collects all Rota composed for that instrument. It begins with Three Duets for Flute and Oboe, charming in their discreetly archaizing tendency, e.g., "Old Carillon" and "Old Romance." Better yet are the Five Pieces for Flute and Piano, eight-and-a-half minutes of steady delight. We go from the frisky "Puccettino's Promenade" (about a fairy-tale character who also appears in the *Seven Difficult Pieces for Children*) to the ear-coddling

"Serenade," thence to a sedate "Pavane"; next, to a scurrying, squawking, "Brooding Hen," finally to the somewhat naïve "Little Soldier."

There follows the popular Trio for Flute, Violin and Piano (1958), which begins with a rousing emotional *allegro ma non troppo* that thinks nothing of slowing down to a crawl midst its fleet passages, even coming to a teasing virtual stop, before darting on. The middle movement is an *andante sostenuto*—*sostenuto* being, like *scorrevole* (fluid), a favorite Rotan marking. Here the music is meditative, self-effacing, as if a very modest person were being introspective in melancholy fashion. And then the concluding "Galop," a dizzying spin into an amiable whirlwind.

The Sonata for Flute and Harp is pleasant but without great distinction; the Quintet for Flute, Oboe, Viola, Cello and Harp is a restrained but graceful welding together of the five instruments. *Nino Rota: Chamber Music* (ASV 1072) is a fine cross section, slightly surpassed by the Venice Ensemble's *Nino Rota: Chamber Music, Vol. 1* (Rainbow Classics, 98105), which, besides some already discussed pieces, offers also the charming Clarinet and Piano Sonata, the amazing Bassoon and Piano Toccata that compresses into five minutes enough melody for a much longer piece, and the Brass and Organ Sonata, a very rare case of the organ happily at home with a chamber ensemble.

The best one-disc anthology of the piano and chamber music is *Nino Rota: Kremerata Musica* (BIS 870), featuring Gidon Kremer the performer in only one piece, but other excellent musicians in some works already discussed, and three further winners: the *Piccola Offerta Musicale* for wind quintet, the Saraband and Toccata for Harp, and what may be Rota's chamber masterpiece, the irresistible Nonet (1959–77), which at twenty-six minutes assumes epic dimensions in this always so concise oeuvre.

Concision, however, is relaxed in the *concertante* and symphonic music. Available on two separate but equal CDs is the coupling

of Rota's two piano concertos, works of great and diverse fun. The booklets for both versions (Chandos 9681 and EMI 56869) contain curious errors along with useful information. The Piano Concerto in C (1959–60) was composed for the great Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli. In the first movement, *allegro cantabile*, we hear Rota, the great *improvvisatore*, at the piano, changing moods carrying him hither and yon, with the orchestra as enthusiastic traveling companion. The moods are dazzlingly varied, going from cautiously explorative, through proudly declamatory, to militarily trumpeting, and occasional quiet moments when the soloist virtually sinks into himself. In the April *Gramophone*, Michael Oliver refers to Mozartian improvisation yielding to a Prokofiev-like toccata, "bizarrely contrasted ideas [providing] maximum opportunity for ingeniously fertile development, including agreeably showy virtuosity."

The second movement is a delectable theme subjected to some exquisite variations, always songful, yet never sloppily sentimental. The final movement, *allegro*, is the most delicate blend of melancholy and sprightliness, the A and B Modes interpenetrating in a brilliant manner, but also with a certain bumptious bonhomie. On Chandos, the Virtuosi Italiani are conducted by Marco Boni, with Massimo Palumbo the superb soloist; on EMI, Muti conducts the Scala Philharmonic with the equally fine pianism of Giorgia Tomassi. Chandos has a drier acoustic, a more analytical clarity; EMI, more lushly conducted and closely miked, offers more, sometimes too much, opulence.

The Concerto in E, "Piccolo mondo antico" relates, as Michael Oliver points out, to Antonio Fogazzaro's famous 1896 novel of that title, not mentioned in either booklet. The novel concerns a strict Catholic husband in conflict with his freethinker wife, and one would like to know its connection to the music. It is Rota's last work (1978), much more romantic in character than its 1960 predecessor, with, as Oliver points out, richly colored climaxes and rhe-

torical cadenzas that suggest movie scores or Rachmaninov. Still, it remains Rota. Muti gets a bit carried away here, and I slightly prefer the Chandos version, chaster despite its somewhat broader tempos.

There exists, twice recorded, a related work, *Concerto Soirée for Piano and Orchestra*, in five movements, based on old dance forms and written on a commission from RAI (Radio Italy) in 1961–2. This work provided some music for the ballet *La Strada* and the movie *8 1/2*, and has tremendous range even within individual movements, stretching Benedetto Lupo with Massimo De Bernart and the Sicilian Symphony Orchestra (Nuova Era 7063) and Danielle Laval with Giuseppe Grazioli and the City of Ferrara Orchestra (Auvidis 1034) to the utmost in two equally successful renderings. It should become a concert-hall favorite.

The Nuova Era disc couples it with the *Symphony on a Love Song* (1947), a four-movement work not performed until 1972. This, too, nourished a couple of film scores, *The Crystal Mountain* and *The Leopard*. Composed along traditional lines (initial *allegro* in sonata form, scherzo, etc.) and based on exposition, development, recapitulation, and epilogue, it invests these gray-ing German forms with genuine Rota feeling and never veers into pastiche.

The *Concerto Soirée* is more variously coupled on the Auvidis disc. Here we not only get the youthful *Dances for Small Orchestra* and the Sonata for Chamber Orchestra, an interesting transcription for unusual forces of the Sonata for Flute and Harp, but also one of the absolute masterpieces, the *Fantasy on Twelve Notes of "Don Giovanni" for Piano and Orchestra*. This twelve-minute work is based on a twelve-tone row *avant la lettre* that Darius Milhaud discovered in the Mozart opera's dramatic finale, at the words "*non si pasce di cibo mortale qui si pasce di cibo celeste*" ("he does not feed on mortal food who feeds on that of heaven"). Working freely from those twelve notes, Rota evolves a deeply moving representation in miniature of the Don Giovanni story, but not, of course, in a dodecaphonic,

serialist, or atonal fashion. The piece is a confluence of every Rota mood and manner, with some darker tones added. The piano and orchestra interaction is exemplary, what with, for instance, high piano notes played off against deep rumbles in the orchestra. The melancholy final melody is one of the subtlest and most touching Rota ever devised, but is characteristically shaken off by a concluding comment from the piano, inscrutable but, perhaps, conciliatory.

Similarly quintessential is the sublime Concerto for Strings (1964–5), revised in 1977, mentioned earlier (Sony 66279). Here, again, all of Rota's aching tunefulness and mischievous merriment come together in a work where, as Francesco Lombardi put it, "the whole family of bowed instruments is summoned to display its very special melodic gifts." As performed by Muti and the Scala Philharmonic, this music is truly *cibo celeste*, celestial nourishment.

We now come to Rota the symphonist: there are three (some authorities say four) bona fide symphonies, of which the first and second are available from the Norrköping Symphony under Ole Kristian Ruud (BIS 970). Though Rota toiled over the First for four years (1935–39), or perhaps because of it, it is a bright student work that goes down easily but unremarkably. It was premiered under the baton of Goffredo Petrassi at Venice's La Fenice in a presumably livelier performance, but it is a work lacking in distinctive profile.

The Second Symphony, subtitled *Tarantina-Anni di pellegrinaggio*, was begun during the years in remote Taranto, worked on between 1937 and 1941 in Bari, and rewritten in Rome in 1975, hence the subtitle. This peripatetic work nevertheless shows careful planning; witness its four movements that are, almost to the second, of equal length. It sounds like a collaboration between updated Schumann and Tchaikovsky, but gets beyond mere pleasantness only in the last movement, allegro vivace, which displays a fine forward thrust.

Rota's only available sacred work is the oratorio *Mysterium* of 1962 (Claves 9323), a

magnificent piece recorded live by the church chorus and orchestra of Assisi, which commissioned it. An unsatisfactory recording, this, rather like a small monochrome reproduction of a great Renaissance fresco. The four soloists, choir, children's chorus, and orchestra under Armando Renzi are blameless; the recording technique is inadequate, with the high voices, choral passages, and tutti suffering especially. Yet if you can listen past these imperfections, you will hear a noble oratorio sounding not stodgily churchy but refreshingly worldly, the various Bible and prayer snippets carrying the religious sentiment. The work cries out for a better recording.

Only three of the operas are on disc. *La notte di un neurastenico* (1959) is a comic one-acter commissioned by RAI, with a text by Riccardo Bachelli. A charming farce, it concerns an insomniac who, to ensure hard-won sleep, rents not only his own hotel room, but also the two adjoining ones. But a trade fair puts rooms at a premium, and the greedy concierge rents out those adjoining ones to, respectively, a fat *commendatore* and a pair of illicit lovers. The former drops his shoes loudly, the latter make amorous noises. There results a delicious brouhaha, with everyone sleeplessly in everyone else's hair. The music comprises jazzy riffs from Rota's film music, irascible monologues, a comic chorus for the alarmed hotel staff, waltz-time mooning for the lovers, and total pandemonium. Compressed into a mere thirty-four minutes, the piece shuttles swiftly between the wispily teasing and suddenly frenetic, and creates a kind of musical hallucination; if music can laugh, this one surely does at the hands of the Symphony Orchestra of Calabria under Denise Fedeli with duly frisky or fraught singing (Discantica 09).

Rota's most often performed opera is *Il cappello di paglia di Firenze* (1955), a verse adaptation by Rota and his mother of Labiche and Michel's famous boulevard comedy *Un Chapeau de paille d'Italie*. There are two recorded versions. One is a live

recording of the 1976 Brussels production with Magda Olivero (Gala 100.547), with poor sound. Much better is the 1975 studio recording (BMG Ricordi 74321551092—I kid you not) with Rota conducting the Rome Symphony and Chorus. He had forgotten ever writing the work until, ten years later, a memorious friend produced it in Palermo, newly refurbished by Rota.

This is the one about the horse that eats the straw hat of an adulterous Parisienne trysting in the Bois de Boulogne with a ferocious officer. The woman can't go home to her brutish husband until the horse's owner provides a hard-to-find duplicate. He launches on a desperate search for one, pursued by his brand-new bride, her angry father, and the whole provincial bridal party. The score is full of allusions to opera buffa from Cimarosa to Rossini, but displays also, as Luigi Bellingardi put it, "an utterly fantastical twentieth-century idiom not far removed from Prokofiev, Poulenc, Françaix, and Rieti," not to mention delightful quotations from Rota's own film scores.

Yet this is no musical crossword puzzle or crazy quilt. Rather, to quote Bellingardi again, "a true farce, perhaps the only one produced by the Italian theater in the twentieth century," as was patently borne out by a recent fun-filled production by the Juilliard School. The music perfectly espouses the absurd convolutions and outrageous jocularly of the text, something Rota may have perfected by matching his movie music to the exacting requirements of film images. Quirino Principe aptly described this music as "refined, ironic, and melancholic, with traces of malicious sarcasm." It is particularly catchy in the diverse choruses—for the provincial wedding guests traipsing awed through Paris, for dizzily gossipy milliners at the hat shop, for blasé socialites at the Baroness de Champigny's party, and for the weary soldiers on night patrol—marvelous achievements in group characterization.

Regrettably, there are no recordings of Rota's operas based on the Arabian nights (*Aladino e la lampada magica*, 1968) and on Eduardo de Fillippo's zesty Neapolitan

comedy *Napoli milionaria* (1977). But we do have *La visita meravigliosa* (1965–69), derived from H. G. Wells's youthful *The Wonderful Visit* (1895), about which Rota's famous costume-designer cousin Titina, who submitted it to Nino, commented: "It is the story of your life." It tells of an angel who, through an accident, lands in the small parish of Siddenford, where only the kindly vicar accepts his angelic identity; the others ridicule or persecute him as a presumed escapee from a madhouse—all save Delia, the sweet orphaned servant girl at the vicarage, who loves the angel, suffers a fiery death for him, and is carried off by him to heaven.

Despite one or two hidden arias, the opera is mostly ariosos with a rich and varied orchestral accompaniment. There is no real resemblance to the work of any other composer, not even the usual Nino Rota. The recording (Discantica 02/03), with the orchestra and chorus of the Teatro Sociale di Rovigno under Giuseppe Grazioli, does this moving work ample justice, and the lovely singing from Danilo Rigosa (Vicar), Maurizio Frunosi (Angel), Maria Costanza Nocentini (Delia), and the rest, makes one long all the more for a full production, however considerable its demands.

Needed even more are further explorations of Rota's noncinematic music on CD and in the homes of music lovers everywhere. It is a cruel joke that Rota's last opera was met with, as Giordano Montecchi has noted, "a chorus of harsh criticism which indicated the unbridgeable gulf between the composer's poetic and musical intelligence and the academic musical world."

For me, the prototypical Rota utterance is this: "When I am at the piano and I look for inspiration for my music, it may be that I am happy. But, as a man, how can one be happy amid the unhappiness of others? . . . If I could make everyone around me have a moment of serenity, I would do all I can. Basically, this is the sentiment that animates my music." Indeed. Go and discover it for yourselves; abundant moments of serenity are guaranteed.

Starry skies above

by David Mermelstein

Summer offers myriad pleasures, but perhaps none as diverting as the music festival. The ubiquity and variety of these events only further their appeal, and the best-known of them—Bayreuth, Salzburg, and Glyndebourne in Europe, and Marlboro, Tanglewood, and Aspen in America—are venerable institutions with their own cachet and rituals. But even less familiar festivals have charms, arguably all the more so because of their novelty. The Ojai Festival in California is hardly young (this year marked its fifty-fourth anniversary) and far from unknown to music lovers in the Golden State. Yet there is a hidden quality to Ojai (pronounced OH-high), a sense that it is a well-kept secret best kept well. Partly it's a question of geography. The city of Ojai, which fancies itself something of an arts-and-crafts center, lies in a valley about ninety miles northwest of Los Angeles and fifteen miles from the Pacific coast. This is the place that Frank Capra chose for Shangri-La when he filmed *Lost Horizon* more than sixty years ago. And something of that idyllic environment persists to this day. Though some ancillary events have broadened the festival in recent years, it remains at heart a relaxed out-of-doors affair running just three days. Since 1952, it has occurred in a small public park, within which stands a tiny wooden band shell—the so-called Libbey Bowl—mounted on a flagstone base. The shell is surrounded by a verdant canopy of sycamores and flanked by

benches and a great lawn. Yet at this unassuming spot, Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, and Pierre Boulez, to name but a few, have conducted orchestras in a range of challenging works. That tradition of programming unconventional repertory persists to this day and has become the Ojai Festival's defining feature. This year, Sir Simon Rattle, soon to be the chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, was the music director, leading the Los Angeles Philharmonic.¹ And in what some would call an enhancement, two Englishmen whose music Rattle has championed, the wunderkind Thomas Adès and the would-be bad-boy Mark-Anthony Turnage, were the composers-in-residence. The tilt toward Cool Britannia was not complete, however, for the biggest (and arguably the most memorable) works on the programs were concert performances of operas by Ravel and Poulenc.

Though the festival offers its share of solo and chamber recitals, the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evening orchestral programs are what draw music lovers to Ojai. The first of these concerts this year featured major works by Turnage and Adès, as well as Ravel's winsome *L'enfant et les sortilèges*. Turnage's *Kai*, here receiving its American premiere, is a decade-old piece dedicated to

1 The Ojai Music Festival ran from May 31 to June 4, 2000. The orchestral concerts, featuring the Los Angeles Philharmonic under the direction of Sir Simon Rattle, were on June 2, 3, and 4.

Kai Scheffler, a cellist who died young. Though some of the work's thematic material was recycled from Turnage's now-abandoned opera about the jazz bassist Charles Mingus, the tribute to Scheffler, by turns mournful and crackling, is quite heartfelt. Turnage likes to meld jazz riffs and modern-classical motives, and he does so with characteristic conviction in *Kai*. But the center of the piece is the vibrant, aching cello line, which in this performance was penetratingly played by Ben Hong, the assistant principal cellist of the philharmonic. For his part, Rattle, who conducted the premiere of this work, held his own, but he was clearly spoiling for Adès's *Asyla*, having its West Coast debut. Much has been made of *Asyla*, a symphony in all but name. Many are calling it the best work thus far by Adès, a prodigiously gifted composer who has yet to turn thirty. Indeed, the work may prove just the groundbreaking effort fawning critics insist it is. Certainly its strange harmonies, converging in unexpected ways, are instantly captivating. In the second movement, for example, a preternaturally calm sound-world is evoked, at least partly, through cow bells. And in the third movement, which Adès has named "Ecstasio," disparate instrumental elements unify and build into repeated figures that suggest nothing so much as a mechanical device grown huge and insatiable. Yet Adès leavens that impression by investing this music with humor, too. Three years ago, Rattle gave the premiere of this work in Birmingham, and his affection for it is obvious—and infectious. The philharmonic has long played well for Rattle, a favorite guest conductor in Los Angeles, and the orchestra sounded particularly pliant in this case.

Flexibility was at the heart of the *L'enfant* performance as well, which Rattle and the orchestra had played gorgeously just a week before in Los Angeles. If anything, Rattle's control over the musicians was even greater in Ojai, with an unusual transparency in the strings especially welcome. The bucolic environment may have had something to do with the success: this is lush, atmospheric

music, and hearing it in the perfumed night only increased its sensuous appeal. Yet full credit must be given to the eight soloists, for they were flawless. Ravel based his one-act charmer, completed in 1925, on a text supplied by Colette, and the result is beguiling on every count. The fantastic scenario concerns a willful child and his antagonistic encounters with, first, a host of animated household goods (an armchair, a grandfather clock, a teapot, etc.) and, later, a group of garden animals. Success in such endeavors naturally depends on abandoning reticence. And so it was at the Libbey Bowl, where generally upright singers like the tenor John Aler (a blustering teapot and a manic old man shouting numbers) and the baritone François Le Roux (a distraught clock and a highly sexed tomcat) let decorum slip away in favor of fun. The Israeli mezzo-soprano Rinat Shaham (replacing an indisposed Lorraine Hunt Lieberson) lent a sympathetic tint to the brat, but it was another mezzo, Marietta Simpson, as the child's put-upon maman, who really impressed, with her ample warm tone.

Saturday evening's concert focused on loss. The program opened with *Deluge*, a single-movement piano concerto written by the young composer Naomi Sekiya. She had won something called the "Music for Tomorrow" award, and with victory came a performance of her piece at the festival. *Deluge* is a memorial for Sekiya's father, and so anguish surfaced throughout the work, a mostly agreeable amalgam of early Stravinsky and film-noir scores. Rattle, conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic's New Music Group, led a committed performance, and Vicki Ray, as the piano soloist, variously imparted both sensitivity and brute force. The featured work was Turnage's distended *Blood on the Floor* (1996), which was receiving its American premiere. This piece, which takes its title from a Francis Bacon painting, is an elegy on a far bigger scale. A nine-movement suite for chamber orchestra and jazz trio (saxophone, guitar, and drums), Turnage's knockabout score honors

his brother, Andy, who died of a drug overdose. Turnage told me that he wrote the piece in “bits,” and there’s no question it has an episodic quality and is perhaps better appreciated parceled out. Frequently engaging in its raucous, jazz-inflected way, and occasionally even during its quieter moments, the work became ponderous and repetitive as it wore on. (This performance lasted about eighty minutes.) Yet there was no denying the enthusiasm with which Rattle and the players essayed the music; they were true believers, even when such devotion wasn’t warranted.

The first half of Sunday’s concert rather too symbolically paired Adès (*These Premises Are Alarmed*, 1996) with Benjamin Britten (orchestral interludes from the opera *Peter Grimes*, 1945). But the contrasts were worth savoring, as was the unmistakable sense that with Adès producing music of such glossy wit, England’s place on the musical scene remains secure. Rattle and the philharmonic clearly delighted in the freewheeling piquancy of the young composer’s brief, cheeky work, but they saved their earnestness for Britten’s *Four Sea Interludes* and *Passacaglia*. Their richly colored performance was precise and gripping, the winds especially pellucid. But it is worth mentioning that the philharmonic had played this music at a subscription concert in March, conducted by Franz Welser-Möst, the music director-designate of the Cleveland Orchestra, and that performance was even more convincing.

Poulenc’s rarely performed short opera *Les mamelles de Tirésias* concluded the entire festival. Like the Ravel two evenings before, it was gamely and lovingly dispatched, and by the same performers. Based on Guillaume Apollinaire’s 1917 play of the same name (the first work to be called “surrealist”), Poulenc’s opera is a gay romp with

a serious point: war decimates populations; avid procreation rebuilds them. These days, the political aspects of the piece don’t carry much weight, but the effervescent score still does. Under Rattle’s direction, the music soared, much as the heroine Thérèse’s breasts do (balloons, really) when they are sent aloft. As with the Ravel, the intricacies of the plot don’t matter nearly so much as the spirit of the work, and in this performance, the singers embraced the silliness fully. Le Roux, with his superb diction and pleasing timbre, brought an apt music-hall spirit to the Theater Director’s introduction, which sets up the tale. The bass Julien Rodescu and the tenor Thomas Young, as Messrs Presto and Lacouf, were a happy study in contrasts, physically as well as vocally. And Aler, in excellent voice throughout the festival, seemed to be having the time of his life as Thérèse’s bemused husband. But the soprano Heidi Grant Murphy, as Thérèse, stood out most, and not just because of her starring role. Murphy can be a cloying singer, but here she sang with Dawn Upshaw-like freshness and appeared utterly comfortable in this sometimes baffling piece.

Unlike traditional concert series, the tighter summer festivals have a way of surprising us. Their entire complexion can change from year to year. Ojai certainly welcomes change. In 1999, for instance, Esa-Pekka Salonen, the music director of the L.A. Philharmonic, oversaw a festival rich in scores from his native Finland. And next year, Salonen will return to Ojai, bringing with him programs devoted to music of the Americas. Whatever the specific musical results, something interesting and potentially enlightening is bound to occur. It always has, anyway. That’s the wonder of Ojai—well, that and the picturesque mountains and the warm breezes and the shady groves.

The media

The politics of posturing

by James Bowman

One of the most piquant moments in a summer dominated by what is being called, without apparent irony, “reality TV,” came when it was announced that on the Wednesday night of the Republican convention, the exiguous network coverage of the event had been soundly trounced in the ratings by “Survivor” on CBS. This is the show in which sixteen people were deposited on an island in the Pacific and invited to vote each other off the island until there is only one left. The “survivor” wins a million dollars. The episode that induced so many potential convention-watchers to switch the channel was the one in which the black basketball coach from outside Philadelphia, Gervase, was voted off the island, thus giving the lie to the rumor that had been going the rounds that he was the ultimate winner who had already been chosen but whose identity CBS had managed to keep secret.

Meanwhile, back in Philadelphia, the allegedly real convention was bombing with the public (though not necessarily with the pundits, about which more later). Perhaps, their appetites whetted by all this “reality” programming, they thought that deliberation about the future governance of the country was pretty thin gruel in comparison. And there was certainly this to be said in favor of such a view of the matter, that the expulsion of Gervase was at least a matter of uncertainty and speculation. He had been widely picked as an early departure because of his refusal to do any work, or make any effort

in the common interest. Then a visitor to the show’s website had found an apparently hidden page showing his photo as the only one of the contestants without a red X marked through his face. Could he, of all people, have won the million dollars? And what would it say about the islanders if he had?

Even if his expulsion, as it turned out to be, had been just another of the ordinary weekly ostracisms which were winning large audiences for the show, there was more drama to it than to the exhaustively scripted convention, which neatly raises the point of what artifice is required to make a thing look “real.” Debuting the same week on Fox, though not doing nearly so well in the ratings, was “American High,” another alleged “reality” show in which a group of high school kids from Highland Park, Illinois were followed around by digital cameras, and submitted their own video diaries, to produce 2800 hours of footage which was edited down and cross-cut in the style of such popular TV dramas as “E.R.” and “N.Y.P.D. Blue.” One of the subjects later told Andy Meisler of *The New York Times* that “I never felt like a character in a TV series. . . . I still don’t. As far as I’m concerned, they put our lives on television *exactly as we lived them*” [emphasis added].

There you have it, folks. The realest reality, like the truest poetry, is the most feigning. The very touchstone of that reality is the narrative shape given it by a skillful

editor, who can make it look more like what we expect reality to look like—which, it not too surprisingly turns out, is “E.R.” The guiding spirit and executive producer of “American High,” R. J. Cutler, whose earlier filmic efforts have involved him in the political documentaries *The War Room* and *The Perfect Candidate*, is under no illusions about his job as a reality-manufacturer. As he told Meisler: “The great Orwellian irony of the phrase reality television is that there’s nothing real about it all. . . . Whereas we, as documentary filmmakers, know that we are not reproducing reality—we’re storytellers, trying to tell the stories we find as truly and entertainingly as possible.”

But narrative shape is not the only means by which “reality” may be recognized. “American High” was canceled after two weeks because it got much less attention from both the public and the media than either “Survivor” or its CBS stablemate “Big Brother”—in which ten people were locked in a house in Los Angeles for three months, watched by cameras every hour of every day, and encouraged to ingratiate themselves with each other as well as with the watchers at home, who would be the ultimate arbiters of who would be thrown out and who would be left alone at the end to win the prize of half a million dollars. The scope for originality in television has never been very great. But where the subjects of “American High” were at least filmed in their natural habitat, the complete artificiality of the situations of both “Survivor” and “Big Brother” was bound to undercut any slight claims they might otherwise have had to represent “reality.”

Or so you might think. But the reality shows with adults had something that the one with kids did not, and probably could not have afforded, namely real, adult-style banality. Self-dramatization is so natural a part of teenage life anyway that replaying some of its ostentatious fakery is paradoxically one of the ways in which “American High” sought to guarantee its supposed reality. One of the kids, after a fight with his

parents, turns to his videocam confidante and affirms: “Like I said, my parents are real pricks.” Whoa! Now *that’s* reality for you! As Cutler told Meisler, when he and his crew saw that footage “We were like: ‘Oh, my God! God bless you, Morgan! You actually did it!’” But once you have become an adult and joined the ranks of the pricks, this kind of thing does not look so real anymore. What looks “real” to adults is the banality of office or domestic politics.

And that is what both “Survivor” and “Big Brother” sought to reproduce in an artificial, watchable setting. Both use the artificialities to their advantage in this way, since the cameras and the prospects of big money have a sort of hothouse effect on the natural paranoia that breeds among those who must spend long periods together. Most people would agree, I think, that neither the island dwellers of “Survivor” nor the shut-ins of “Big Brother” were very likeable, but then few characters on soap operas are, either. In fact, the “reality” shows derive their appeal from their resemblance to soap opera, but soap opera taken to a higher level. Edward Rothstein in *The New York Times* noticed the essential similarity between the two. “Soap operas,” he wrote, “take ‘fake’ people and put them in ‘real’ situations; these shows take real people and put them in fake situations.”

Maybe we can be excused if we find it kind of hard to tell the difference. Thus it was, perhaps, that one of the expelled castaways on “Survivor,” a doctor in real life, cashed in on his moment of fame by signing up to play a doctor on a TV soap opera. But the alleged reality of the would-be survivors meant that people who would have been self-conscious, even ashamed, to bring up something that happened on “As the World Turns” around the office water cooler were happy to discuss who would be next to be thrown off the island on “Survivor,” or whether the flirtations between Josh and Brittany on “Big Brother” would amount to anything. This license for gossip and prurience was conferred on them by our cultural leaders and journalists who were having too

much fun ridiculing both sets of contestants to turn their fire on the combination of cynicism and exhibitionism which had brought them to their attention in the first place.

Indeed, I wonder if the whole purpose of this programing was not to make its audience feel superior to the poor saps who had agreed to trade their dignity for fame and a chance at a considerable sum of money. Certainly the shows provided the occasion for much display of wit on the part of those who are paid to engage in it upon the public stage. My favorite examples of this were the anonymously written daily updates on "Big Brother" which appeared on the website of salon.com. Not only were these delightfully witty in themselves, but they made it unnecessary for connoisseurs of the real to have to watch the shows at all. Nor is it only the people who appear on the screen who are the butt of Salon-Anon's sarcastic wit. The network gets a well-deserved helping of it too.

Julie Chen [an on-air reporter who was the network's hostess for "Big Brother"], or more likely her agent, planted a story in *The New York Times* this week that she was actually a tough newswoman fighting hard against cheesiness on the show. This makes sense to us. You can see how when the role was presented to her originally she could have mistaken it for the "CBS Evening News."

But even Salon-Anon's wicked verbal shafts directed at the "Big Brother" housemates and their network handlers tended to play the voyeur's game by pretending that his own observation of them was not a relevant datum. Like the folks round the water cooler, he treats them as if they were characters in a work of fiction whose lives invite critical comment simply by virtue of the author's decision to spread them out for us in a work of fiction. But in this case the characters had *themselves* chosen self-exposure, and not for very obscure reasons either, since even those who did not

win the prizes were invited by CBS to exploit their small budget of celebrity to the best of their ability by appearances on the network's low-rated breakfast program, "The Early Show." One woman gushed about all the "good things that have happened to me since I left the show" including such "commercial opportunities" (as Bryant Gumbel put it) as the chance to write a book and a column for *Entertainment Weekly*. "I'm taking advantage—right. Right. Yeah."

"Supply and demand," said Gumbel with satisfaction. Of course if the demand drops off too precipitately she could always follow, as others of the show's women were said to have done, Darva Conger's route to minor stardom by entertaining offers from *Playboy* to strip for the camera. Nor was it only the contestants themselves who were encouraged to think, like Hotspur, that it were an easy leap to pluck bright honor from the pale-faced moon. A host of hosts and commentators like Dr. Drew Pinsky, the "Health and Relationships Specialist" for "Big Brother," must have had hopes of becoming household names. One of them, a psychiatrist named Carole Lieberman, was asked by an interviewer for KCBS in Los Angeles why the "Big Brother" housemates might be doing it, besides the money. "I think the main reason is the celebrity status," she said, not disclaiming any such motivation of her own.

But why should the serious news media (in which category, it is becoming increasingly clear, we can hardly continue to include the networks themselves) fail frequently to remind us of this attempt to manipulate us into assisting the network in its principal task of manufacturing new celebrities? Or even for the most part to comment on it at all? This would seem a curious omission at best and a serious dereliction of duty at worst. But the "reality" shows are helping us to see that one of the salient features of the American national character at the turn of the century is a quasi-political conviction that the pursuit of fame is just as much a human and natural

right as the Jeffersonian “pursuit of happiness.”

Indeed, some kind of fame (or at least notoriety) seems at times almost to be a precondition of happiness for twenty-first-century Americans, as the egregious Morgan of “American High” implied when he announced his intention of leaving his mark on the world. In his case that mark might easily be a black one, but he may very well not mind about that. Where he makes his appeal to the audience’s capacity for sympathy is merely in the desire for fame, which the audience may be supposed to treasure too. That is why it is in rather bad taste to observe that people are getting themselves into undignified positions in their quest for fame—especially as getting into undignified or otherwise bizarre positions is the shortest way to get it. But our refusal to notice what the clowns are paid for having pies thrown in their faces is not to be construed as being any hindrance to our joining in and deriving great pleasure from the pie-throwing. Perhaps that, too, will lead to fame for the likes of Salon-Anon.

But the political dimension of the “reality” programing does not stop there, for there is an exactly comparable instance of media exploitation in the realm of politics as such. I refer to the stage-managing not only of the political conventions but also of, to as large an extent as possible, the election campaign itself. To be sure, there are ritual denunciations of this practice (particularly when it is engaged in by the Republicans) in the serious press—and on the network news which uses such denunciations as part of its attempt to cling to a place among the serious press. “Distilled down to their essence,” *The New York Times* sniffed in an editorial, “the Republican and Democratic conventions this summer are photo opportunities built around balloon drops, confetti storms, sound bites from acceptance speeches, and climactic tableaux of the nominees with their families, defeated opponents, and Congressional allies.”

So frequently was this complaint heard at

the time of the Republican convention that the Democrats figured they could get some mileage out of echoing it and touting their convention in advance as being relatively unscripted. Vice President Gore even announced that he was writing his own acceptance speech, which seemed for one exciting moment to open up the prospect of his humanizing himself by making some horrible gaffe. Talk about a high-wire performance! “Ultimately what people saw [at the Republican gathering] was the surface image,” Joe Andrew, the DNC chairman, told *The New York Times*. “We are going to focus on issues, because we know the issue landscape is home turf for us.” Bob Shrum, the Gore campaign’s media man, was quoted by *The Washington Post* as saying that “We’re going to have a serious convention, not a kind of ersatz variety show.” Referring to the biographical video of George W. Bush that appeared in Philadelphia, he added: “You’re not going to see Al Gore driving around in a pickup truck with a dog.” Certainly not! Why, the very idea of Mr. Gore stooping to fob the voters off with warm and fuzzy heart-tugging imagery!

Naturally, the *Post* reporter Mike Allen reports this absurdity with a straight face, just as the media generally did President Clinton’s equally absurd denials and evasions on the subject of his sexual liaison with Monica Lewinsky. Such is the price of objectivity! But Shrum’s remark gives the *Post* an opportunity to intervene and explain why he said it, and what it portends for the Democrats’ “media strategy”:

Joe Andrew . . . said the lineup [of convention speakers] is a calculated effort to produce a convention that is less scripted than the Republicans’. “These are elected officials with their own agendas and their own records, and representatives of important groups,” Andrew said. “The risk of an unscripted convention is worth taking, because we believe George W. Bush came across as shallow. We’re going to have more give-and-take.”

Andrew said the members of racial minorities on the GOP podium came across as props,

while Democrats have a diverse population of delegates, as well. . . . Political analysts said the lineup of speakers seems to be driven largely by Gore's need to connect with traditional Democratic voters. Republican officials expressed surprise when told about the Democrats' program yesterday, and said the strategy appears defensive.

But the media strategy behind the media strategy is to allow the media to tell us what the media strategy is. Thus the *Times* reporter Peter Marks writes that "even the sleek computers, made by Apple and supplied to each delegation on the floor, are intended subtly to reinforce the idea of the Democrats as the party of the future, and Vice President Al Gore as the candidate of innovation. (Computers were scarce on the floor of the First Union Center in Philadelphia.)"

What would we do without such penetrating analyses? Well, I suppose we could just fall back on the party spokesman, the ubiquitous Joe Andrew, who told Mr. Marks that the veritable orchard of Apples in Los Angeles was "a message in and of itself: 'Think Different,'"—just like the Apple slogan. Or "We think outside the box." Anyway, translating the symbolism gives the media an important function to perform. In fact, from their point of view, the more fakery there is in politics the better, since they can then take on the job of telling us what the parade of platitudes and banalities really means. That's why their complaints about a "scripted" convention rang rather hollow.

The Republicans must have known that this interpretive function, now conceded to the media, together with the media's obsession with ethnic and sexual "diversity," would bring down upon their heads a torrent of insightful comments to the effect that their own ostentatious display of such diversity amounted to a mere façade meant to disguise the reality of their overwhelming homogeneity. But even saying that the Republicans are putting on a show of diversity tells people that Republicans accept the

valuation that the media puts on diversity, which is close enough for those who are not so obsessed with it themselves. Criticism of Republican tokenism helps spread the word that the Republicans are now to be considered as safely within the media "mainstream"—where such symbolism is of supreme importance and where this year's election will be won.

In many ways, the Republican platform is more radical than the now-defunct Gingrich revolution of 1994 was, particularly with regard to social security and educational privatization. But 1994 was a year in which dissatisfaction with both the president and the Congress made coming from outside the media's "mainstream" a political winner. Now both parties recognize that whichever makes the more plausible claim to carry on the Clinton legacy of "compassion" and "inclusiveness" will win. Actual policy proposals will not matter decisively, except insofar as the Democrats may succeed (with the media's help) in characterizing the Republican ones as being in some plausible sense uncompassionate and non-inclusive. To this extent, the election is the Republicans' to lose, since the polls for the past year have been suggesting that, as between two "mainstream" parties, a majority will choose the fresh one.

The corollary of this belief, if it is true, is that the people have made their peace with the media. One cannot imagine the slogan being sported by backers of Governor Bush that was so often to be seen on the bumpers of his father's supporters in 1992: "Annoy the media. Re-elect Bush." Perhaps the media are no longer the bogeys they were because the increasing variety of news sources on cable and the Internet make people think the big news purveyors, especially the networks, are no longer the monolithic powers they once were. Or perhaps President Clinton's beating the impeachment rap has persuaded people that the media's power to make or break political careers is no longer very great, if it ever was. Or perhaps the Clintonification of politics represented by

the advent of the Republicans' Clinton, George W. Bush, has persuaded most people that both parties have now embraced the media and celebrity culture and so neither should henceforth be considered as being in an adversarial relationship with it. That people have been so willing to tolerate those appallingly cheesy "reality" shows might have been considered an early warning of this phenomenon.

By a coincidence, just at the time of the conventions, an advance copy of Michael Pack's documentary "The Fall of Newt Gingrich," scheduled to run on PBS on August 30, came into my hands. Pack followed Gingrich around throughout the campaigning season of 1998, and the former Speaker was as voluble as usual about his plans for the party and his thoughts in general. It was less than two years ago when he still seemed a dangerous rival to Clinton, and yet to watch him now is to feel the pangs of nostalgia for a political world vanished, in the words of the Anglo-Saxon elegy "The Wanderer," as if it had never been. For Gingrich may turn out to be our last link with genuine political spontaneity. He may have said a lot of foolish things, but foolishness is now almost the only reliable indicator of authenticity in a politician. Even his loopy Tofflerism now seems a thousand times more worthy of our attention than either of the two major parties' rival versions of Clintonian triangulation.

Mr Pack's film, in fact, supplies a particularly poignant irony when seen against the backdrop of the Speaker's fascination with the future. Both he and his aides—to say nothing of his wife (as she then was)

—are seen babbling happily about the prospects for an increased Republican majority right up until the very moment, quite late on election night, that it became clear that the Republicans would lose seats. "This was not the election I would have predicted," says Newt glumly, and we can hardly fail to feel a little thrill of pity and terror for a man whose public life, now ending, had been so largely built around prediction. He is left ruefully to reflect that, in the battle between them, Clinton "won the personality contest and I won the policies"—adding that that is the choice he would have made, if he had had to choose.

But Clinton won more than the personality contest. He won the struggle to determine the style of politics as it is to be carried on in this and (presumably) subsequent elections. He won the acquiescence of the media and the public in an ever-increasing dishonesty and vapidness of presentation of which this year's conventions were only the beginning. Like the embryo celebrities on the "reality" shows, he is interesting to us less for any personal qualities he may have than for his skill at thrusting himself upon our attention without them. If he makes a "mistake," as he showed with yet another quasi-apology for the Lewinsky affair on the eve of the convention, it becomes just a part of his celebrity narrative, like the bizarre decision of Richard, one of the "Survivor" castaways, to go without trousers. Real "reality," by contrast, comes in the screw-up, the failure that cannot be spun. Michael Pack manages to show precisely this happening to Newt Gingrich, and so reminds us of a time when politics could be tragedy as well as soap opera.

Posthumous impresario

by *Eric Ormsby*

“Man has created death,” Yeats wrote, and his last collection of poems with its stark title represents the poet’s increasingly baffled attempt not only to create his own death but also to stage-manage his memorial from beyond the tomb. The effort demanded the erection of a perfected effigy of himself. Through poetry he would dictate not merely the idealized contours of his own image but even the mundane details of his funeral and interment. “Under Ben Bulben,” the superb testamentary poem which opens the collection, stipulates both his epitaph and his final resting place. Yeats intended through this poem to prevent a state funeral; as he wrote to Dorothy Wellesley, a few months before his death, “I write my poems for the Irish people but I am damned if I will have them at my funeral.” We all know, of course, what happens to the best-laid plans. Yeats died in France in January 1939 and was buried there. A decade later, his remains were exhumed and returned to Ireland to be buried in Drumcliff churchyard under the promontory of Ben Bulben; and yet, there is to this day some doubt as to whether it was in fact Yeats’s mortal remains that were re-interred in his native soil or those of some other, unknown deceased. To complicate matters further, as James Pethica magisterially demonstrates in this latest volume of the *Cornell Yeats*,¹ there is even some question as to whether Yeats’s celebrated epitaph was not in fact accidentally truncated. In certain manuscripts

there occurs another opening line, thus:

Draw rein; draw breath.
Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horse man pass by.

The addition of “Draw rein; draw breath” completes the rhyme, and its absence is felt in the poem as usually printed; but was this an oversight on the part of Yeats or an unexpected way of accentuating the epitaph—not a lapse, that is, but a master-stroke? In addition, the poet’s wife, George, altered the arrangement of *Last Poems* so that “Under Ben Bulben,” which Yeats had deliberately placed first, came last; from her viewpoint it made perfect sense that Yeats’s epitaph conclude the collection, but as Pethica and others before him have pointed out, Yeats had wanted the poem to lead off the book, so that all the ensuing poems would read as though they came from the Great Beyond. Having communicated so often, to his own satisfaction at least, with those who were dead and gone, this posthumous impresario of himself could not imagine a cessation of communication after he too had crossed to the other side.

Yeats’s poems are to the highest degree marmoreal; the best seem to have been

¹ *Last Poems: Manuscript Materials*, by W. B. Yeats, edited by James Pethica; Cornell University Press, 527 pages, \$89.50.

hewed and chiselled out of some more than travertine material to an incisive finality of expression. The later poems may revel in the colloquial but theirs is an everyday speech already set in stone; indeed, it is this constant counterpoint between the vernacular and the lapidary that gives many of the later poems their unusual force. A glance at Yeats's drafts shows that this impression of monumentality is often misleading. The *Variorum Yeats* of 1957 (revised 1966) had already revealed the extent of Yeats's own revisions, and the commendable works of Jon Stallworthy, Richard J. Finneran, and others have explored this in detail. The Cornell Yeats, an exemplary edition which has already progressed through seven volumes of the poems and four of the plays, lays bare not only the author's own revisions, as well as his hesitations, false starts and about-faces, but also those inadvertent alterations wrought by the hand of chance: words or phrases or whole lines swallowed up between fair copy and proof; misarrangements of sequences; and worst of all, the pious intentions of the author's amanuenses, especially his wife. In reading through the present volume, one begins to see certain masterpieces not as inevitable, as they appear to be on a printed page, but rather almost as felicitous escapees from the machinations of contingency.

Inevitably, it is what is missing, what must be missing, that most tantalizes; namely, that which took place in the poet's imagination between one draft and the next to bring a line or a stanza to perfection. What decisive leap, for example, occurred between "The old bones shake among the rocks" in an early draft of "The Black Tower," and the finished refrain: "Old bones upon the mountain shake"? Of course, it is not the editor's task to relume those flashes between finished and unfinished verses which must always intrigue us, but rather to compile an exhaustive and meticulous account of the process as it can be known through the surviving manuscripts themselves. At times, in puzzling over the drafts,

it may seem as though we were glimpsing only the take off and landing spots of a high jumper, and not the leap itself, but there is much to be learned even from such traces.

The Cornell Yeats provides every bibliographic tool that one could need for a fresh study of the last poems. Thus, Pethica has drawn up an authoritative census of manuscripts that leaves no physical detail of the successive drafts or their provenance unmentioned. He has also contributed an introduction that is at once erudite, perceptive, and rather unexpectedly witty. The manuscripts are given in sharp photo facsimiles on the lefthand page and the transcription stands *en face*, in plain or italic or bold type, depending on the medium of the original (pen, pencil, or typewriter). Every squiggle, doodle, cross out, and second thought has been transcribed with a bibliographic meticulousness that at first seems labyrinthine but in the end clarifies nearly every pen or pencil stroke Yeats made. (The complex typography is impossible, alas, to reproduce in such a review as this.) At moments we seem to come upon a page from which Yeats has just lifted his hand. The retention of the poet's execrable spelling throughout reinforces this spooky illusion; in an early version of "The Circus Animals' Desertion," for example, we read, "I saught a theme & saught for it in vain/ I have saught it daily for sick weeks or so . . ." Inevitably, given Yeats's appallingly illegible handwriting, harder to puzzle out than an Ottoman Turkish chancery script, there are lines in transcription that remain wholly conjectural, thus: "[?held] [?the] [?] [?that] the [?] of" from the earliest surviving draft of "Under Ben Bulbin," and which sounds more like Jorie Graham on a good day than Yeats on his worst. Needless to say, each facsimile and transcript is graced with apposite footnotes. In toiling through the facsimiles and their renditions, search as I might, I could not identify a single wrongly transcribed word or letter. Like its predecessors, the book itself has been beautifully designed and printed and is a joy to read.

Still, what is the use of all this—not only

the well nigh maniacal reproduction of each jot and tittle of an old man's faltering hand but also the spiny thickets of annotation? One can see the importance of facsimile editions for a specialized group of textual scholars, but what about the rest of us, lovers of Yeats's poetry or poetry readers at large? What about students or even the fabled "general reader?"

Such editorial accomplishments as the Cornell Yeats are eminently worthwhile for their own sakes and probably need no further justification, but I have come to believe (though I am not a teacher of poetry) that *Last Poems*, along with its six predecessors in the series, may represent ideal instruments for the teaching of poetry (or rather, what actually can be taught of poetry). The volume is expensive but probably not much more so than the latest leaden English textbook. True, the inventories, transcriptions, and analytical descriptions of manuscripts, however masterful, are unusually dry and it may not matter that such inventories have a dusty glitter all their own. But once their bristling strangeness, created by all manner of filigreed brackets and sigla, becomes a bit familiar, the fastidious transcriptions are oddly satisfying in that they demonstrate with exactitude just what we can ascertain about the literal writing of the poems. As such, they represent an ultimate extreme from the gassy pontifications of literary theorists which inevitably, and by design, distance us from the original texts themselves; these by contrast bring us as close to them as we can get. Indeed, such painstakingly literal scrutiny of the poems serves to remind us that poems are physical arrays of meaningful sounds before they are anything else. To draw on an example from an earlier volume, in "The Wild Swans at Coole," Yeats initially wrote, "The woods are in their autumn colour/ But the lake waters are low. . . ." He then revised this to read, "The trees are in their autumn foliage/ The water in the lake is low" and later still, "The trees are in their autumn foliage/ The woodland paths are dry." It was only after four or five such revisions that he hit upon:

"The trees are in their autumn beauty,/ The woodland paths are dry. . . ." Why did Yeats first choose "colour" and then change it to "foliage" and then settle on "beauty?" Through a study of such revisions, students are obliged to recognize that words have weight and cadence, and that one word may be distinctly superior to another in a given place. Yeats is an ideal master for such study since in the greatest poems of his randy old age he combines passionate—indeed, almost primitive—feeling with cold but passionate craft in equal measure, and one can observe raw impulse grappling with disciplined expression throughout the drafts. If anything, Yeats's passions (famously fueled by injections of monkey glands) became more insistent as he aged; "lust and rage" had become his chief "spurs" to writing poetry. Thus, in a late essay, he approvingly quotes Boccaccio who said of Dante, "Always both in youth and maturity he found room among his virtues for lechery."

What the drafts demonstrate most compellingly is that for Yeats composition did not entail the elaboration of "ideas;" indeed, all his ideas were conspicuously second-hand. Rather, the writing of a poem involved the discovery of a musical argument. The propositions of the poem to be written were inordinately clear (for at least one poem Yeats even wrote a prose summary beforehand); it was the music that remained to be discovered. We witness this process often in the nineteen *Last Poems*, even if some of them—"Cuchulain Comforted," in particular—were composed with a swiftness unusual for Yeats.

In the May 11 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Denis Donoghue dismissed "Under Ben Bulbin" as "mainly rant." (Yeats has only himself to blame: Why didn't he write, "Irish critics, learn your trade?") Rant or not, the poem provides some sense of how Yeats set about building a longer poem from the first rough and ungainly words to triumphant melodic articulation. In the early drafts of "Under Ben Bulbin" (impossible to reproduce here), only the lengths and ar-

rangement of the lines, broken into arbitrary units, resemble poetry; otherwise, the lines contain jottings or notations of ideas as yet undeveloped and there is little if any rhyme. Thirteen or so pages later, the rhymes begin to appear; what was inchoate before slowly assumes shape. In following Yeats as he affixes his rhymes, one is reminded of a spider spooling out a web, for the rhymes act as pegs on which the spun strands of the lines hang as they form. Once the rhymes appear, and Yeats refines them, the poem begins to tauten visibly. There is a sense of incipient music. A line or stanza will suddenly appear to lift, to take on a cadence of its own, as though by a process of tuning. You might even call it a sort of gradual incarnation, whereby the words grow ever more physically present, more palpable, as the poem develops. To understand a poem means first and foremost to come as close as is possible to a grasp of its complete configuration as a physical pattern in which sound, sense, and objective reality seamlessly coincide. The minute descriptions of paper and watermarks—those notations of “off-white or faded cream unruled typing paper” and “BANQUE-VIDALON” watermarks—that at first acquaintance may appear at once vertiginously picayune and obsessively fussy are in fact precious clues to a fuller grasp of the circumstances surrounding the creation of the work itself.

Whatever affords a privileged glimpse of the actual process of composition brings us closer to the poems themselves. What the poet excluded or altered, here lovingly resurrected, enables us to understand what he included and left untouched. Out of the welter of competing and crossed-over phrases and fits of inchoate rhyme in such a masterpiece as “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” the famous closing couplet suddenly emerges, perfect and entire, as though *ex nihilo*; and yet, it too comes from the “foul rag and bone shop of the heart.” The “Manuscript Materials” of *Last Poems* bring us as close as we will ever get to that hidden place within us, at once bestial and enchanted, “where all the ladders start.”

Patriotism of the heart

Norman Podhoretz My Love Affair with America: The Cautionary Tale of a Cheerful Conservative.

Free Press, 248 pages, \$25

reviewed by James Bowman

Why, I wonder, does Norman Podhoretz subtitle the latest installment of his impressively emotional and intellectual autobiography a “cautionary tale”? Against what are we cautioned? Why should we be warned, like Belloc’s naughty children, by a touching account of the education in “Americanism” of a son of Jewish-Galician immigrants, or by the unabashed celebration of American patriotism it gave rise to? Is there a slight ironic joke here? Be careful, or you might find yourself becoming a patriot?

The real story of the book is not so much that of how patriotism was produced by Mr. Podhoretz’s experience of this country but of how that experience, or something pretty close to it, engendered both patriotism in him and its opposite in so many of his near-contemporaries. It wasn’t long ago that writing a book in praise of patriotism would have been thought an exercise in a class with preaching a sermon, as in the famous anecdote of Calvin Coolidge, against sin. This began to change during the youth of Norman Podhoretz, who, having been born the year after Coolidge left office, was not old enough to have been among the young men who heard the siren song of the Communist left in the 1930s. By the time he came intellectually of age, the Cold War was beginning and patriotism, as earlier generations would have understood it, was having an Indian Summer before the killing frosts of the ideological Sixties made it what it has since become: namely, a partisan sentiment.

There is always some danger to anti-Communists of becoming merely the mirror images of their opponents. If the Communists are against patriotism, then we are

for it. But both make the same assumption that it is something you can be for or against, like a rise in interest rates or more money for defense spending, rather than something you are born with, like blue eyes or left-handedness. In the course of Mr. Podhoretz's useful and concise summing-up of the ideological wars of which he is so doughty a veteran, it is not always entirely clear that he escapes from this trap. It is a fine thing, to be sure, that he thinks so highly of the bounty and the security that the United States of America has afforded him, particularly when so many others have been so ungrateful for the same things. But if an even more bountiful and welcoming polity were to rise up out of the sea, would he then transfer his loyalties to it?

The book begins with one of the most famous of the many famous quotations from Dr. Samuel Johnson—the one about patriotism's being the last refuge of a scoundrel—but one that is curiously misunderstood as a lapse in Johnson's usually sound judgment, as several correspondents of *The Wall Street Journal* pointed out when the confusion was repeated there. Here is the quotation from Boswell, for 7 April 1775:

Patriotism having become one of our topicks, Johnson suddenly uttered, in a strong determined tone, an apophthegm, at which many will start: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." But let it be considered, that he did not mean a real and generous love of our country, but that pretended patriotism which so many, in all ages and countries, have made a cloak for self-interest.

Boswell's surprise shows that patriotism understood as "a real and generous love of our country" was even then the primary meaning of the word, but his gloss on what he imagines Johnson really meant does not tell the whole story either. As *The Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, "patriot," for the first century or so after its first appearance in English (in 1605), was generally accom-

panied "with 'good,' 'true,' 'worthy,' or other commendatory adjective" because the word was "often applied to one who supported the rights of the country against the King and court."

In other words, in Johnson's time it would still have retained some of its connotations as the sophistry of choice for those—many of whom were at that very moment beginning a revolution in North America—who insisted that their hatred of the sovereign was motivated by their love of the country over which his sovereignty was exercised. The fourth edition of Johnson's dictionary, perhaps influenced by the American rebellion, which he opposed, noted that the word was "sometimes used for a factious disturber of the government"—a use which must have been more than occasional, since, as Macaulay tells us, "Horace Walpole scarcely exaggerated when he said that," in the mid-eighteenth century, "the most popular declaration which a candidate could make on the hustings was that he had never been and never would be a patriot."

In this respect, therefore, the Johnsonian patriotic scoundrel could be regarded as the direct ancestor of the Communists and fellow-travelers to whose discomfiture Mr. Podhoretz devotes so much of his memoir, men and women who would defend their betrayal of America by pleading a higher, nobler loyalty—originally to the international proletariat and subsequently to mere humanity. Perhaps it should not be surprising that, in America at least, the patriot of the 1770s could be seen as having elided into the anti-patriot of the 1930s. But if Mr. Podhoretz's book has a fault it is that in loudly and commendably hymning the author's sense of his country's virtues, won in the teeth of intellectual fashion, it does not look more deeply into the case of Johnson's scoundrel, who is not really the patriot as such but the man who sets himself up as the only judge of where his loyalties lie.

Nor is this by any means an academic question, as Mr. Podhoretz himself recog-

nizes in his discussion of a controversy sparked by the monthly magazine *First Things* in 1996. When several contributors to that magazine's symposium entitled "The End of Democracy?" allowed themselves to be construed as suggesting that they no longer owed any obedience to their country's judiciary, which had proved itself adamant in condoning abortion (among other things), Mr. Podhoretz rightly saw it as exactly the sort of thing that the Left had got up to in the 1960s. He wrote to the magazine's editor, his friend Richard John Neuhaus, that "I did not become a conservative in order to become a radical, let alone to support the preaching of revolution against this country." In this as in other cases where his fellow conservatives have been tempted to despair about the country's moral decline, he has remained resolutely and reassuringly optimistic—which is a sign both of patriotism and of Americanism.

Perhaps, after all, there is more in him than Mr. Podhoretz realizes of his grandmother Esther Malkah whose sense of elemental loyalties was somewhat more primitive. When her son, the author's uncle, was drafted into Uncle Sam's army in the Second World War, her reaction was one of utter fury: *Ver iz er, der Uncle Sam? Im bob ikh extra in dr'erd!* "Who is this Uncle Sam? Him I would especially like to see six feet under." Mr. Podhoretz comments that, even had she known what the fate of the Jews in Europe was,

she was altogether incapable of minding anyone's business but her own, which extended to her children and grandchildren and not a micromillimeter farther than that. Compared to their welfare, nothing was of any importance; and anything that harmed them (a category that self-evidently included being drafted into the army) was bad, period, with no discussion or elaboration needed or even allowed.

Like other forms of unreflective organic attachment, Esther's devotion to her family seems morally rather dubious these days. Its

patriotic equivalent is in Stephen Decatur's famous toast at Norfolk, Virginia, in 1816. "Our Country! In her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong." No one nowadays holds up such patriotism as any kind of a model to follow. That way, we think, lies "ethnic cleansing" and the ovens of Auschwitz. (Though it would be interesting to know how far, in fact, "Hitler's willing executioners" were motivated by their love of country.) But Norman Podhoretz's charming and readable book implicitly suggests that the patriotism of the heart, for the most part overshadowed in it by that of the head, is not so unlike Stephen Decatur's as we have all grown used to thinking.

A stereopticon

Kurt Johnson & Steve Coates,
Nabokov's Blues: The Scientific
Odyssey of a Literary Genius.
Zoland Books, 372 pages, \$27

Brian Boyd & Robert Michael Pyle,
editors Nabokov's Butterflies:
Unpublished and Uncollected Writings.
Beacon Press, 782 pages, \$45

reviewed by Guy Davenport

When Alfred Russel Wallace, who postulated the theory of natural selection neck and neck with Darwin, was netting specimens of insects in Sumatra in 1861, a butterfly he was chasing (*Kallima paralekta*, one of the Purple Emperors) disappeared before his eyes. It had cunningly perched on a bush and pretended it was a leaf, because its folded wings looked exactly like the leaves it was among, stem and all.

Wallace's "Mimicry and Other Protective Resemblances among Animals" (1867), now the third chapter in his *Natural Selection and Tropical Nature*, remains the classic study of what we learned in 1917 to call *camouflage*. That mistaken identities, false resemblances,

and elaborate deceptions figure as both theme and technique in Vladimir Nabokov's fiction obtrudes, embarrasses, or fuses with any study of his lepidoptery. There is the giddy suspicion that they are the same thing.

These two books might plausibly have been published as a single work, a kind of stereopticon: Johnson and Coates on Nabokov as a lepidopterist who wrote novels, stories, and literary studies of Gogol and Pushkin; Boyd and Pyle on Nabokov as a writer who was a lepidopterist. The "scientific odyssey" of Johnson and Coates's title transcends its triteness, for its account of the intrepid scientists who completed and vindicated Nabokov's taxonomy of a small butterfly called the Karner Blue is authentically heroic. The adventures of the Israeli lepidopterist Dubi Benyamini in South America among flooding rivers and revolutionaries is a little epic in itself.

Nabokov netted butterflies in Wyoming, never far from the family car (driven by his wife, Vera). The men who, years later, carried on his work on the Blues penetrated jungles in the Dominican Republic, braved the upper reaches of the Amazon, endured capture by raggle-taggle soldiers of obscure political factions in Peru, and ran up high meadows of the Andes tracking the mating affairs of butterflies not much bigger than your thumbnail.

Lepidoptery in Johnson and Coates's brilliant and lucid book unfolds as a history involving extraordinarily interesting people—the Hungarian Zsolt Bálint's troubles with European museum nabobs resembles a Nabokovian short story—as well as many adjustments of scientific theories over the past twenty-five years: continental drift, cladistics, and the evolutionary branching of species.

Nabokov's place in all this was his six years of microscopy at Harvard's Museum of Natural History counting scales on butterfly wings and sorting out species according to the shape of their genitalia. He had no degree in etymology. He was a professor

of Russian at Wellesley, a novelist, a critic, and a refugee twice over, from Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany. He had shared a streetcar with Kafka in Berlin and read to an audience of Russian émigrés in Paris with Joyce (and a soccer team) among them. Behind him was a career as a Russian novelist (under the name Sirin) and poet. He was perfectly at home in English and French, and would soon, like Conrad, become a master of English prose.

Johnson and Coates's thorough study is nicely miniaturized in *Nabokov's Butterflies* by Robert Michael Pyle's introductory "Nabokov Among the Lepidopterists," an essay of much charm and skill, charting the link between Nabokov and the brilliant next generation that continued his work. Pyle, who has also contributed "Butterflies and Moths Named By and For Vladimir Nabokov" to this big book, gives us a fine sense of the kind of people, "the leppers," who study butterflies. They're a chummy confraternity with more than a whiff of dottiness and eccentricity. Nabokov with his net in the gorges is Cornell folklore. Darwin as an undergraduate at Cambridge was more often in the fens collecting bugs than at lectures. The villain of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is a lepidopterist. One of Iris Murdoch's nastier characters studies spiders.

At the time of his death in 1977, Nabokov was working on an iconography of butterflies in art. One hopes that, as with his pioneer taxonomy, someone will continue this work. There are butterflies in Egyptian frescoes (eyed by a tabby cat climbing through reeds). Dutch still lifes are rich in butterflies. There's a Red Admirable (not *Admiral*, as Nabokov was forever correcting this misnomer) smack in the center of Scurat's *Sunday on La Grand Jatte*, and a fritillary (it looks like) dead center in Tchelitchev's *Cache-Cache*. Shakespeare knew his butterflies (six images, all focused on their beauty). Keats's "fly" is a butterfly. Whistler used one for a monogram. The Bible mentions only the butterfly's cousin, the moth.

One of the world's most beautiful books

is Moses Harris's *The Aurelian, or Natural History of English Insects; Namely Moths and Butterflies, Together with the Plants on which They Feed* (London, 1766). The eighteenth century was the heyday of the curio cabinet and the mania for collecting. The modern museum was invented in Copenhagen by Ole Worm (1588–1654), with a stuffed crocodile as its chief wonder. The next age saw the advent of order—Carl Linnaeus, a Swede, and his assistants (like Peter Kalm in North America) inventing a system for naming everything by family, genus, and species. In deepest perspective, Nabokov was carrying on Linnaeus's work: distinguishing species with finer and finer differences. Aristotle started it all by noting that some mammals, like dogs, pee forward, and that some, like cats, pee backward. Two-and-a-half millennia later we're still classifying.

Johnson and Coates are wonderfully clear about the two schools of taxonomy, the “splitters” (among whom, Nabokov) and the “lumpers.” Nature is so strange that the great Agassiz did a brisk business in getting together the young and adults of marine critters previously thought to be different animals. And all of this cataloguing of nature is mystified and complicated by metamorphosis (caterpillar, cocoon, butterfly; alternate forms for ferns year by year) and

mimicry. There's a zebra who's actually a striped horse. And moths that look like butterflies, and butterflies that look like moths. And there's a plant, *Lolium temulentum*, that looks like wheat and knows how to camouflage itself in with it. It is bearded darnel and is host to a poisonous smut; Jesus called this invisible interloper *tares*, and made a parable about it, because it can only be sorted out in winnowing. Jesus also liked the Greek word for “actor,” *hypocrites*, a dissembler.

The recurring theme in Nabokov's fiction is obsession, usually by self-deception. His characters destroy themselves in one big mistake. They see exact resemblances where there is none at all. They live in horizon-to-horizon delusions. They plot enterprises so contingent on improbabilities that a child could point out the hazards. Shakespeare's tragedies depend on mistaken identities leading to rash and irreversible actions; his comedies, on disguises leading to happy laughter. Nabokov saw only senseless violence where Shakespeare saw tragedy, only sardonic humor where Shakespeare saw comedy. Aloof and detached, he *observed*. He had an Olympian interest in human folly, the only truly interesting thing in the universe, and a human, exacting, and finely attentive interest in the universe itself.

Crudity beyond belief

by *Theodore Dalrymple*

It is possible that there are uglier towns in the world than Walsall, but if so I do not know them: and I consider myself better than averagely traveled. But while Walsall undoubtedly exists, it is difficult to know where precisely it begins and ends, because it is in the middle of one of the largest and most depressing contiguous areas of urban devastation in the world, the Black Country of the English Midlands. There is nowhere in the world where it is possible to travel such long distances without seeing anything grateful to the eye. To the hideousness of nineteenth-century industrialization is added the desolation of twentieth-century obsolescence. The Black Country looks like Ceausescu's Romania with fast food outlets.

I have been to Walsall twice in my life. The first time was to visit its then principal attraction for outsiders, an establishment called the Serpentarium, which advertised itself as the largest reptile petshop in Europe. It has since closed its doors, after the owner was found floating in a greasy and chemically polluted local canal. The coroner's explanation of his demise was suicide, though rumors persist that he was killed by rival reptile smugglers, the illegal importation of venomous snakes into Britain now being big business. I discovered in the course of my desultory inquiries after the owner's death that my own city council employs an official whose function is to grant licences to people who wish to keep such household pets as rattlesnakes and

banded kraits: the would-be licensees having to prove to his satisfaction that they have rendered impossible the escape of their beloved serpents into what is euphemistically known as, and frequently called, "the community."

I asked the official how many licences he had issued the previous year.

"None," he replied.

"And how many applications for licences were there?"

"None," he replied again.

Busy man: but since in my hospital we occasionally treat rattlesnake bites, it must be presumed that the unregulated sale and harboring of venomous snakes continues. No one in my city can know for certain, therefore, where the speckled band—the dreaded Indian swamp adder that put paid to the cunning and evil Dr. Grimesby Roylott—may not strike again. Sherlock Holmes scotch'd the snake, he did not kill it.

Since the Serpentarium ceased trading, however, a new public attraction to replace it has arisen in Walsall, a large new art gallery, in its way every bit as surprising as was the largest reptile petshop in Europe: for one no more expects to find art in Walsall than king cobras or bearded basilisks.

More surprising still than the mere existence of an art gallery in such a place is the fact that it now positively dominates the town. No medieval cathedral ever loomed over its surrounding city more overwhelm-

ingly than does the New Art Gallery loom over Walsall. But while the function of most cathedrals is perfectly clear from their architectural form—the first-time visitor to Chartres, for example, doesn't really need to be told that the cathedral is a cathedral—the first time visitor to Walsall might experience some difficulty in divining the function of the gallery building. A postmodernist grain silo, perhaps? Something more sinister, probably. The structure of the building—two lumpen perpendicular cubes covered in pink-gray rectangular scales—suggests nothing definite or clear to the mind, though thoughts of the Stasi or South American secret police soon rise to consciousness. Perhaps they torture people in there, though it would have to be on a very large scale to justify so big a building. And art, of course, has traditionally been regarded as a form of torture by a substantial proportion of the British population, to be looked at only under extreme duress.

The building is hideous, completely lacking in grace or unity of conception: one would have expected no less from contemporary British architects, who have, over the last half-century or so, definitively ruined the townscapes of the nation and thus contributed powerfully to the dissolution of its identity. The excuse sometimes offered for the wretchedness of their efforts, a lack of money, certainly does not apply in this case: for the gallery, housing only a small collection, cost \$32 million to build. It is lack of taste, not lack of money, that explains the vileness of modern British architecture.

The building has been widely praised in the press, however, not so much for its beauty—a totally subjective quality, we are always assured, and therefore scarcely to be taken seriously by the wise or the prudent—but for its originality. For it can be proved beyond reasonable dispute that there is no art gallery anywhere else in the world quite like the New Art Gallery, Walsall. This in itself is a cause for pride, irrespective of the other qualities of, or defects in, the building. One critic began his article of praise with the words, "Nobody really knows

what a public art gallery should look like any more": to which one is inclined to reply, "And whose fault is that?" Is not some kind of common agreement over standards of taste, proportion, scale and harmony precisely what is necessary for the creation of a townscape that does not act on the retina like a scouring pad?

No doubt many an ungracious exterior is saved by its interior (certainly the hopeful tenet of modern pop psychology); but not the New Art Gallery, Walsall. The visitor enters via a huge pair of sliding doors, activated automatically by his approach. These doors are on such a scale that they altogether dwarf the individual, and would be more appropriate to the entry of a column of cavalry than to that of a lone aesthete. However, nothing—not even these megalomaniac portals—could prepare the visitor for the atrium on their other side.

This enormous atrium seems to take up a third of the entire building. And one half expects to see Mussolini sitting at a table on a raised platform at the other end of it. The entrance to the gallery sends shivers down the spine: not of pleasure, but of apprehension. Here inhumanity is celebrated as an architectural virtue. The materials with which the internal walls are faced are cold and heartless. They are raw concrete that has been allowed to set against wooden planks—thus imparting to the brutal grayness a faint impression of the wood's grain, visible only close up—and wood panelling of the Scandinavian type that was thought chic in the 1960s. One veers between thinking oneself in a fascist foreign ministry and a sauna of gigantic proportions. Here, truly, is size without grandeur.

It comes as a relief that the galleries themselves are on a much reduced scale: but the architects have here achieved precisely the opposite effect, smallness without intimacy. This is an art gallery as imagined by a petit bourgeois modernist, forty years ago.

All the works in the gallery belong to the Garman Ryan Collection, named after the two women who formed it. Kathleen Gar-

man, the daughter of a doctor in Walsall, was the widow of the sculptor Jacob Epstein, of whose work the Walsall gallery has the largest collection in the world. Sally Ryan was the granddaughter of the American tycoon Thomas Fortune Ryan, who was both Epstein's pupil and Garman's friend. They left the collection to the people of Walsall, and for over twenty years it was housed, charmingly, in the reference room of the municipal library.

It is an idiosyncratic and miscellaneous collection, clearly reflecting the taste of the two individuals who assembled it. There are many minor works by major artists, and a few that are arresting. Modigliani's drawing in blue crayon of a caryatid is wonderfully elegant; there are charming portraits by Degas of his sister, by Joshua Reynolds of a young ensign in the Royal Navy, by Corot of a woman reading, by Sisley of his son, Pierre, also reading, and by Veronese of a page boy. There is an exquisite skyscape by Constable. There are minor works by Bernini, Bonnard, Delacroix, Delaunay, Dufy, Géricault, Manet, Matisse, Monet, Pissarro, Rouault, Renoir, Turner, van Gogh and others. It is a strange experience indeed to come out of the stale-fat smell of fast food—the characteristic odor of modern provincial England—into a gallery that contains these small treasures of the western artistic tradition.

There are also works of lesser, or less well-known artists, as well as a leavening of artifacts from Africa and Polynesia—a Bamileke stool from Cameroon, for example—and of archaeological treasures, such as a mask of Nefertiti, Queen of Egypt. This is positively the last thing one expects to find in Walsall.

It is a fine collection for a small town, but oddly enough I haven't met anyone who visited it when it was housed in the municipal library who did not prefer the old arrangement. The New Art Gallery is grandiose rather than grand, and completely out of proportion to the scale of the collection. One thinks of the frog in Aesop that tried to inflate itself to the size of a cow.

There is another disturbing aspect of the New Art Gallery, quite apart from its pompous ugliness: its creeping politicization. This arises from two factors: the government's cultural policy and the source of funding for construction of the gallery: both of which have worked in the same baleful direction.

The government believes in something it calls "social inclusion": which, when applied to cultural institutions, means that they should appeal to all sections of the population equally and without exception. It is not enough that museums should be free of charge to all who are able physically to enter and are inclined to do so: people must be attracted into them who are not normally interested in the kinds of thing that museums traditionally display. The measure of the worth of a museum is not in the intrinsic, civilizational value of what it contains, but in who visits it: and museum curators must therefore now ask Lenin's question, "Who whom?" Indeed, subsidies for museums in England are henceforth to be made dependent upon the numbers of people from ethnic minorities who enter them: so if Rastafarians can't be persuaded to look at the works of Piero della Francesca, there will come a time when, for lack of funds, no one may look at them. In practice, this can only mean the progressive Disneyfication of museums.

Museum directors are unlikely to be heroic types who will resist evil (in this connection, a recent book by the American historian Jonathan Petropoulos, about the co-operation by museum directors and other members of the artistic establishment with Nazi cultural policy, is highly instructive). In Britain, at least, museum directors are state functionaries, who must blow with the ideological wind for the sake both of their careers and of the funding of their institutions. And so it is not altogether surprising to read the following sentence in the catalogue: "There is a certain social and cultural egalitarianism . . . about the Garman Ryan Collection." The word "egalitarianism" is here used as a semantic talisman, to

attract government funds, or at least to keep reductions at bay. A sentence such as "There is a strong sense of aesthetic discrimination . . . about the Garman Ryan Collection" will have to await another government. For the moment, we must pretend that that every product of human endeavor is equally worthy of public display.

The "inclusiveness" of the New Art Gallery manifests itself in its efforts to attract children. That there should be a playroom set aside for small children, decorated with reproductions of works of art from the collection, and supplied with toys in the form of the sculptural exhibits, is no bad thing, allowing parents to visit the galleries on their own while their children are happily occupied elsewhere: though the cosy atmosphere is spoiled by a quotation from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stridently painted on the wall in bold lettering. "Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activity and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts." This transforms children's games into a political statement: and does to children's play what the Soviet Union did to folk dancing.

A playroom is not enough, however. Under the new inclusionary dispensation, children must not only be seen but heard—everywhere in the gallery. And so, placed beneath many of the paintings, is a little table at which they may sit, doing jigsaws of the painting above them. It is now impossible to contemplate the painting without also contemplating the child beneath, fractious or content as the case may be.

It is not difficult to imagine the official justification for this departure in museum display. It is to induct children into the world of art through playfulness. Similar methods have been tried with arithmetic with the result that nine out of ten young adults in much of Britain are unable to multiply six by nine. You get the playfulness all right, but not the induction.

Moreover, once the little table has been set up beneath a painting, no one will ever again be able to look at the painting—or

those paintings hung near it—in silence and tranquillity, at least not if the gallery's desire to attract young children is fulfilled. The induction into the world of art thus results in the destruction of the world of art, which becomes merely another form of entertainment, if a rather insipid and slow-moving one. Why, then, not a fruit machine next to a Veronese? One can already hear in one's mind's ear the honeyed justifications of the museum director, as he seeks to earn the approval of his political masters: by placing the fruit machine next to the Veronese, he is trying to promote the idea that art should be part of everyday life, that there is no clear distinction between art and other aspects of human existence, that if one will but look aright there is art also in a fruit machine, that art is to be enjoyed and not treated as something holy or sacred. He discourses learnedly upon the disrespect in which artists and their productions have been held throughout history, how art has been an object of consumption and use rather than of worship, and how artists never intended their work to be set apart in the secular temples that museums have become. The placement of the fruit machine next to Veronese is, in fact, a return to authenticity.

The pressure to popularize—to become not so much democratic as demotic—arises not only from the government's explicit *Kunstpolitik*, but from the source of funding for new buildings for cultural institutions such as Walsall's gallery. For practically all public cultural projects in Britain are now paid for with money derived from the profits of the National Lottery, a distinctly uncultured, even uncouth, source.

Britain was a latecomer to lotteries as a means of taxation while you smile. There was much resistance to the idea both from the left and the right. But once it was established, the lottery rapidly became an institution, especially among the poor: a tax on stupidity, as a friend of mine put it rather harshly. I am not so sure he is right: infinitesimally small as are the chances of winning, for a poor person of little educa-

tion, no talent and meagre resources, the lottery ticket represents his one chance of achieving great wealth. If nothing else, it allows him to dream of escape from his present condition: so it is not true that his subscription has returned him nothing when he loses, as he almost always does. But the lottery is undoubtedly a confirmatory instance of the biblical prophecy "from he who hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."

As a form of taxation, the lottery is highly regressive: expenditure on it is inversely proportional to income. For the proceeds to be used on the construction of traditional cultural institutions seems, therefore, to be a case of the poor subsidizing the rich: for those who patronize such institutions are overwhelmingly from the richer and better educated sections of the population.

It cannot be said that there is any pressure from below to use the proceeds of the lottery in a demotic fashion: the poor are interested in winning, not in where their money goes when they lose, and they would not patronize the lottery any the less if they knew that the proceeds were spent exclusively on the purchase of champagne for the cabinet. But, stricken with what passes these days for a guilty conscience, the intelligentsia believes that the poor should get something back for their money. The destruction of cultural institutions, by turning them into fairgrounds, is thus the least the intelligentsia can do on the poor's behalf.

Ideology and the mode of finance thus work in the same direction. But neither could have exerted their effect had there not been a fundamental loss of confidence in the intrinsic value of the culture to which we are all heir. And the work of undermining that confidence yet further continues, not least in the museums that are the product of that confidence.

Not far from Walsall is the town of Wolverhampton, glimpses of whose no doubt pompous and slightly ridiculous municipal pride and grandeur can still be seen under

the patina of modern vulgarity. Wolverhampton also has an art gallery, which contains a small but distinguished collection of British eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art. And now it also has a children's corner, which needless to say is interactive—that is to say, children may press buttons to see displays. But the chief characteristic of the children's display is its blatant politicization.

Pressing one button, a Victorian genre painting of a rural family sitting round a table at an evening meal is displayed. Pressing another button, the child who presses it is asked, "Was Victorian Britain really like this?" The answer, of course, is no. Victorian Britain was nothing but a vale of tears for the people, where poverty and hunger stalked the land, injustice was universal, and resistance and strikes were continual. There were no achievements worth mentioning, only woes; and no rural families ever sat round a table to have a meal together.

Pressing another button, the child is asked why the painter did not paint Britain as it really was. The answer, of course, is that no one would have bought his paintings if he had. People, the child is told, preferred fantasies to reality. Victorians were simple liars.

The crudity of all this beggars belief: but it was prepared and organized by scholars. Its subversive tendentiousness is all the worse when one remembers that the great majority of the ten- and eleven-year-old children who are subjected to its influence will not know a single historical date by the time they leave school five, six or seven years later, will not know when the Second World War took place to within the nearest twenty years, and will not be able to name a single significant figure from British history. They will not be multicultural: they will be acultural.

Another interactive display in the children's corner of the Wolverhampton art gallery contrasts a Gainsborough portrait of a scion of the local gentry with an expressionistic portrait of modern urban man: earringed, mouth aggressively wide open, in casual clothes. What, the children are asked,

is the difference between these two portraits?

Well, Gainsborough painted rich clients, who wanted realistic pictures of themselves. Therefore Gainsborough couldn't paint what or whom he pleased. Also, poor chap, he had undergone an arduous training because he was expected to conform to the artistic conventions of his time. He couldn't be himself, but was a mere servant of his patrons. Whereas the modern painter, lucky chap, could paint what or whom he liked, including the poor, without conforming to any convention: for modern painters were expected to develop their own style. Unlike Gainsborough, therefore, the modern painter was free to express himself.

It is surely unnecessary to point out the manifold distortions involved in this sinister

indoctrination of small children, who are powerless to resist its insinuations. The aims of the indoctrination are authoritarian and populist at the same time: authoritarian because no discussion of the question at issue is invited or permitted, the indisputable truth descending *de haut en bas*; and populist because it suggests that artistic creation is merely a question of removing artificial barriers to the expression of the creative genius that exists equally within everyone. For everyone is an artist, merely by virtue of drawing breath: and so a cat may look at a king.

It is never too soon to teach children to judge everything by the simplest, crudest political criteria: and so the custodians of civilization betray and finally destroy it.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

Kingsley Amis *by Joseph Epstein*

Madame de Duras *by Renee Winegarten*

Marcel Proust *by Daniel Mark Epstein*

Wagner's "Ring" *by Patrick J. Smith*

Hector Berlioz *by James Penrose*

Marianne Moore *by William Jay Smith*

Letters

Kuhn's irrationalism

To the Editors:

I would like to respond to a point raised by James Franklin in his insightful critique of my book, *Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History for Our Times* in your June issue. I do not deny his central charge against me, since I do indeed hold that the keys to understanding the nature of science lie in its history and sociology, rather than its logic and philosophy (at least as these fields are currently practiced). However, I believe that Franklin is a bit too quick to conclude that I am a science ignoramus or perhaps even anti-science. A theme that runs through both my book and the ongoing "Science Wars" is that there are several senses in which one might "know" science.

Kuhn is an interesting historical witness precisely because he began life as a trained scientist entrusted with conveying the nature of science to non-scientists who (as Harvard graduates) were destined to decide the fate of science in an "atomic age" that simultaneously conjured up hyperbolic hopes and fears. What should such people—the future leaders of American politics, law, and business—know about science so as to be appropriately sympathetic to the interests of research scientists? This is an inspired question, one that remains relevant in our own time. Kuhn's mentor, Harvard president James Bryant Conant, also had an inspired way of addressing the question. Despite his own distinguished career as a chemist, Conant did not believe that non-scientists had to be grounded in

the technical details of contemporary science. Rather, he had a Platonist's sense of the need to convey different images of science to different sectors of society.

In a nutshell, Conant believed that professional scientists, Harvard non-scientists, and the general public each had to be presented with a different image of science. The success of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is basically a product of the second image coming to dominate the self-image of the humanities and social sciences. However, I wish to focus on the third image because it is here that Franklin seriously misrepresented my argument. When I say (on pages 223–4) that "lab work in today's world would seem to be little more than a showcase activity, like so many tribal rituals, done primarily for the benefit of the spectators," I am not acting out of "learned ignorance" of science. On the contrary, I am motivating Conant's original scheme to allow the general public to observe "science in action" in the laboratories. Conant held that people would be better disposed to science if they were able to visit laboratories, interact with staff, and observe what happens in the course of an experiment. But would they be any better informed about how the result of that experiment acquires the authority associated with claims to scientific knowledge? I doubt it, since the observer will not have access to the labs of other relevant scientists, let alone the public and private interests needed for incorporating the result into processes of wider societal import. However, according to Conant's Platonist vision, because the public are in the

grip of a “seeing is believing” epistemology, simple exposure to a site of “knowledge production” should be sufficient to quell any doubts they might have about science.

This point cuts two ways. It cuts against Franklin’s recommendation that I “spend a year as a bottle washer and data analyst in a lab.” That strategy—if meant as a vehicle of conversion to the scientific worldview—could only work for someone who is easily impressed by sensory experience. But equally, it cuts against the rhetorical success of the early ethnographies of science (e.g. Latour & Woolgar’s *Laboratory Life*), which appealed precisely to the “seeing is believing” epistemology in order to score points against philosophers who discussed the normative structure of science without making reference to what scientists actually do. All this suggests that until we recognize Plato’s hand in the need to show that one knows science in the appropriate way, we shall not make much headway in the ongoing Science Wars.

Steve Fuller
University of Warwick

To the Editors:

In your June issue, James Franklin described Thomas Kuhn as an irrationalist. In this he follows his Mentor, David Stove, who lumped Kuhn together with Popper, Feyerabend, and Lakatos in a book bearing the subtitle *Four Modern Irrationalists*. Stove’s brilliance need not be disputed but his exaggerations, his stridency, and his *enfant terrible* give reason to treat his generalizations with a certain amount of caution.

Feyerabend certainly was an irrationalist in that he came to believe that reason is either useless or non-existent, but Popper and Kuhn never held theories of that kind and therefore were not irrationalists. It can indeed be argued that the theories which they *did* hold were irrational in the sense of containing muddles and mistakes but a muddled or mistaken theory is not the same thing as a theory about the role or non-role of reason in human life. There is more to irrationalism than irrationality. Even if mistaken views entail a theoretical irrationalism, it doesn’t follow that their author holds such a theory; for that to be the case he must both notice the entailment and stick to his original (mistaken) ideas.

Franklin’s opinion that Kuhn is an irrationalist stems in part from the fact that his books are praised by those who really *do* embrace irrationalistic theories. But that proves nothing; Hitler admired Nietzsche but it doesn’t follow that Nietzsche would have admired Hitler.

Franklin produces some other pieces of possible evidence when he states that Kuhn “claim[ed] that most scientists are drones” and “Kuhn declared logic outmoded and replaced it with history.” I can’t find either the claim or the declaration anywhere in Kuhn, and Franklin, unfortunately, gave no page references and did not say which book he was quoting from.

To the allegation that Kuhn “replaces logic by history” one can surely ask: Well, why not? History is not a forbidden subject. The history of science, like the philosophy of science, is a perfectly respectable discipline; moreover, the two disciplines are often taught together under the same roof (though not usually by the same teachers). Franklin’s word “replaced” seems to hint that history itself is illogical. But that can’t be right: scientists and philosophers have no monopoly on logic; historians too can argue logically if they want to and try really hard.

Kuhn was not a philosopher and did not pretend to be one; his subject, his specialty, was the history of science. In the preface to *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he says more than once that the book is intended as a contribution to history. However, he does not reject philosophy. On the contrary, he tends to presuppose that certain well-known *anti*-irrationalist philosophical theses are perfectly okay. For example, he assumes without argument that scientists rely on induction and are right to do so. One version of that assumption can be seen in a semi-definitional statement about science which appears on page four of *Structure*: “Observation and experience can and must drastically restrict the range of admissible scientific belief, else there would be no science.” Later, on page twenty-four, Kuhn lists what he takes to be the motives of scientists in choosing to pursue this or that line of enquiry. He mentions:

1. discovery of facts which are “particularly revealing of the nature of things”
2. the need to describe facts with more precision

3. the need to verify predictions
4. the availability of newly-invented apparatus.

This is not irrationalism; it is a familiar kind of old-fashioned philosophy of science.

One of Franklin's objections to "replacing logic with history" seems to rest on the idea that history and the other human sciences are just no good. That notion is encapsulated in an assertion, attributed to Galileo, which Franklin quotes with approval; namely, the assertion that in the humanities "neither true nor false exists." In my opinion such a view itself embodies a species of irrationalism.

Another piece of evidence adduced by Franklin is the supposed fact that Kuhn thinks scientific choices are determined solely by social pressures. So Franklin wrote:

the explanation of why some change occurs in science, such as the belief in the Copernican system replacing belief in Ptolemy's, is required to be in terms of social causes, such as the interests of patrons.

Does this really represent Kuhn's belief? No, it does not. A statement of what he actually believes can be found on, for example, page 169 of *Structure*, where he said that new scientific theories can only arise when "Nature itself" undermines an older theory. In his lengthy discussion of what he calls paradigms, Kuhn repeatedly insists that revolutions in science arise when "Nature itself" presents situations which had not been predicted and which eventually turn out to be radically incompatible with existing theory. In the postscript to the second edition of *Structure* he wrote: "The demonstrated ability to set up and solve puzzles presented by nature is, in the case of value conflict, the dominant criterion accepted by most members of a scientific community." It is just conceivable, but extremely unlikely, that pressures from patrons and peer groups always override what nature itself reveals or suggests to the enquirer. But Kuhn does not make that ridiculous claim even if some of his admirers do.

Kuhn's assertion that scientists (like other human beings) can be influenced by peer groups and paymasters is not a wicked heresy which

philosophers have a duty to repress: it is an empirical thesis which might be true or might be false—a proposition the truth or falsehood of which could in principle be settled by empirically-minded historians. (I would guess that it must be true to *some* extent because scientists are people.)

Stove referred to the fact that Kuhn refuses to use the word "truth," a fact which he calls "chilling." I would call it foolish rather than chilling because its stems not, as Stove supposes, from irrationalism, which is a mistaken theory about reason, but from Kuhn's silly theory about truth. He thinks truth is a teleological notion. He supposes that if he says "p is true" he will commit himself to a false and semi-religious theory, viz., that everything in the universe is aiming at an imaginary abstract entity called "The Truth." He would have done better to use the word "true" in an ordinary humdrum fashion. For insofar as he is happy to use words like "solving" and "successful" and "correct" he has no good reason to reject the word "true."

Kuhn's refusal to speak of truth (which is foolish) and his suggestion that peer groups and patrons *sometimes* exert pressure on scientists (which is plausible) are the two factors most seized on by his careless would-be disciples, i.e., the genuine irrationalists, and also by his critics.

The history of ideas is not the same thing as logic but that doesn't mean it is all illogical or untrue. That it is far from being a contemptible enterprise can be seen from examples like the following: Johns Hopkins University Press is about to publish a really excellent book about the history of the idea of probability. It is by a Sydney author, a certain Dr. J— F—.

Jenny Teichman
New Hall, Cambridge

James Franklin replies:

Steve Fuller is right to say that the epistemology of "seeing is believing" is the issue. It has been the issue since Galileo suggested that looking down a telescope to see whether the heavens changed defeated any number of learned authorities to the contrary. Seeing is not infallible, but its general reliability is what gives science the ability to survive noxious trends in

the humanities. When humanities scholars say that seeing is reliable when recognizing the letters in one another's texts, but unreliable when it happens in a laboratory, their unteachability is equalled only by their inconsistency.

According to Jenny Teichman, Kuhn expressed himself several times as in favor of reason. I know that. The question is what to make of a "friend" of reason who expresses himself against it as well. We should think the same, surely, as we thought of the Soviet Union's calling for peace and naming its space station "Mir." The peculiar way in which Kuhn undermines his rationalism is evident in one of the quotes Teichman takes to be a statement of that rationalism: "The demonstrated ability to set up and solve puzzles presented by nature is . . . the dominant criterion accepted by most members of a scientific community." This is an example of what David Stove called "sociological embedding." It appears to be a statement praising logic, but in fact merely describes the practices of some community. It replaces, in other words, logic with sociology. The crucial page 152 (second edition) of Kuhn's *Structure* consists in little more than iterations of the same trick. That would not have been very harmful if Kuhn had gone on to assert (without then undermining his assertion) that the practice in question would lead scientists closer to the truth. He did not do so.

I do not think that "history and other human sciences are no good," and I do not endorse Galileo's (understandable but exaggerated) remark that in the humanities "neither true nor false exists." On the contrary, I take the relation between evidence and hypothesis to be exactly the same in historiography as it is in science, and just as objective. As Teichman kindly points out, I have written a book on that theme—actually, on the history of that theme. There is nothing wrong with history; it is just that it is not logic. Whether evidence supports a theory is a matter of logic. Whether some community takes evidence to support a theory is a different question, since it is a matter of sociology or history. Both kinds of question deserve investigation. The damage Kuhn did was in giving students of science permission actually to replace the hard questions about its logic with easier questions about its sociology.

James Dickey

To the Editors:

When I interviewed James Dickey for five days in August 1996, he mentioned that Jeffrey Meyers had once approached him about writing his biography, and that he had discouraged Meyers. When I was completing my biography of Dickey, I was told that Meyers was waiting in the wings: after the book came out he would recycle my research into his own narrative. Reading his attack of several new books on Dickey in *The New Criterion* (May 2000)—Chris Dickey's *Summer of Deliverance*, Matthew Bruccoli's *Cruel: The Letters of James Dickey*, and my *James Dickey: The World as a Lie*—I got the feeling that Meyers was writing a proposal to a publisher, swinging his demolition ball at the current Dickey books to make room for his own.

I also suspected Meyers had plugged old lines about Dickey into a new context, so I reread his essay "Gonzo Ginsberg and Moby Dickey" in the summer 1998 *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Here I found a reference to Dickey's visit to Meyers's English Department in Colorado: "Living up to his reputation as a wild poet, he'd been drunk, lecherous, and out of control—breaking up furniture, parties, and marriages." In his review of my biography, Meyers blamed me for having too many "accounts of how Dickey, living up to his reputation as a hell-raising poet, became drunk, lecherous, out of control—breaking up furniture, parties, and marriages." In "Gonzo Ginsberg and Moby Dickey," Meyers denigrated Dickey's "aggressive boastfulness" during one of their meetings in 1982: "On this occasion, like a cornered buccaneer, Jim angrily cut and slashed his way through the literary world." In his review of my biography, Meyers accused me of not appreciating Dickey's critical acumen, but added: "Like a cornered buccaneer, he angrily cut and slashed a path through his rivals."

Meyers catalogued a number of typos and minor factual mistakes that went uncorrected by myself, my publisher's copyeditor, and several proofreaders. But I wondered if Meyers's comment "Hart's book is filled with errors" was made tongue-in-cheek. The book focuses on Dickey's errors—his lies, myths, exaggerations,

stories—and their relation to his career and character. In his zealous quest to unearth mistakes, Meyers often attributed Dickey's distortions to me. He claimed that I misquoted Frost's "I only go when I'm the show," but I was quoting Dickey in a letter: "I don't go if I ain't the show." Meyers accused me of believing that "H. G. Wells . . . lived into his eighties," but again I made clear that I was quoting a letter written by Dickey. Meyers said: "Hart misses many important allusions that give depth and resonance to Dickey's work" like Poe's "Demon of the Perverse," yet I quoted from a letter Dickey wrote about his bad behavior at a party, "It is just that the Demon of the Perverse gets on my shoulders every now and then," and I explained: "Dickey was alluding to Poe's story 'The Imp of the Perverse,' and blaming his disruptiveness on what Poe called the tendency to do wrong simply for the sake of doing wrong." Other allusions, I felt, didn't need glosses.

In his campaign to discredit my biography, Meyers attacked many of my literary judgments. He said Dickey's sensual second wife was nothing like Dante's Beatrice, but it was Dickey who occasionally imagined Deborah to be another Beatrice leading him toward *la vita nuova* after the death of his first wife. Meyers alleged that I compared Proust's Marcel to Frank Cahill, the "rough hero" of Dickey's *Alnilam*, but I did nothing of the sort. I compared Marcel to Joel Cahill in the poem "Joel Cahill Dead," which Dickey published thirty years before the novel appeared. Meyers chastised me for saying that Adrian Leverkühn, the musician-hero in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, was a nihilist "whose monstrous obsessions and appetites contribute to his genius." Mann depicts his Faustus as an aesthete who feeds on and then recomposes the "whole prophetic tradition, so that his work amounts to the creation of a new and independent Apocalypse." Mann deems it "an expression of the nihilist, a crime against music." Meyers also says I refer "to the nonexistent 'criminality of the artist'" theme in Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, yet the theme appears many times. The writer Settembrini argues that he is not like the "abandoned criminal . . . who had covered the walls of his cell with verse," but his intellec-

tual foil, Naphta, argues just as convincingly that madness, disease, fanaticism, "Good and evil, sanctification and criminal conduct [are] all mixed up together" and that Settembrini's Freemasonry "is terroristic. . . . It lifts the burden from the individual conscience, and consecrates in the name of the Absolute every means even to bloodshed, even to crime." Meyers also scoffed at one of my interpretations of a Hemingway story: "[Hart maintains that] Harry's vivid memories, which sustain him during his agonizing death in 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro,' are a 'series of drunken lies.'" In fact, I said nothing about Harry's vivid memories; I referred to comments in the story like

After he [Harry] no longer meant what he said, his lies were more successful with women than when he had told them the truth. . . . He had had his life and it was over and then he went on living it again with different people and more money. . . . If he lived by a lie he should try to die by it. . . . He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself and what he believed in, by drinking so much that he blunted the edge of his perceptions.

Meyers made more serious mistakes when he claimed: "After smashing Dickey on the head with a heavy frying pan and causing a massive blood clot that needed an emergency operation, Deborah [Dickey] had to be committed to a mental institution to save her own life—and his." This is the sort of story Dickey sometimes told about his subdural hematoma, but, as I point out, Deborah Dickey and her close friends denied she took a frying pan to his head. I never alleged that Dickey put his wife in a mental institution after his surgery. Deborah hired a defamation lawyer in 1999 and was prepared to sue me and my publisher for this kind of irresponsible remark.

Many of Meyers's other comments are distortions motivated by spite, or just careless errors. Dickey did not have a "hiatus hernia," but a "hiatal hernia." I did not work on my book for six years, but eight years. In one of his more sarcastic digs at me, Meyers assumes I received a Ph.D., but he gets the name of my degree wrong. Meyers states that only Matthew Bruccoli claims he is a "renowned Fitzgerald scholar," which is

untrue. To turn a line against him, Meyers also seemed to be a buccaneer slashing blindly at his rivals.

Henry Hart
College of William & Mary

To the Editors:

I can't agree with Jeffrey Meyers's offhand remark that my 1998 memoir about my father, poet James Dickey, was "by turns hard-boiled and mawkish," and it seems a particularly low blow to say I turned my old man from "Iron John" (a creation of Robert Bly, whom my father loathed) into "Jello Jim." A cute turn of phrase, to be sure, but more than a little glib considering that *Summer of Deliverance* deals with a boy's perceptions of his brilliant and troubling father, and then, twenty years later, a grown man's relationship with that same father who is still brilliant, still deeply troubling, but deeply loved, and dying. Jello Jim? Try again, Facile Jeffrey.

As for the rest of Meyers's review of Henry Hart's new biography, *James Dickey: The World as a Lie*, the word that comes to mind is—"Bravo!" Hart is a very boring writer and would inflict the same curse on my father. The poetry's greatness—and that is not too big a word—is lost in Hart's relentlessly banal and often credulous repetition of Jim Dickey's personal failings. Before Meyers weighed in, I was beginning to worry that the much-exaggerated evil my father did would live after him, and the good would be interred with his bones. Meyers's review is a marvelous corrective and the beginning, I hope, of a serious reconsideration and new appreciation of James Dickey's work.

Christopher Dickey
Paris, France

Jeffrey Meyers replies:

Hart's whining letter, which wisely ignores my major criticism of his work, is as bad as his book. Instead of being grateful for the many errors that I noted and he can now correct, he assumes—like a dim student—a stance both defiant and cringing. Hart, himself incapable of disinterested criticism, paranoiacally believes I demolished his biography to make way for my own. I'm not writing a life of Dickey but, if I did, certainly wouldn't use his shoddy research. Hart's mistakes are not "minor"; they are egregious. He compounds his culpability by quoting Dickey without realizing when he too made mistakes.

Mann's ascetic Leverkühn, who renounces human love, has no "appetites." Settembrini's view of his archenemy Naphta cannot be taken seriously. There's no crime or criminality in *The Magic Mountain*. Hart also misreads the character and talent of Hemingway's Harry, whose vivid memories reveal that he did have the ability to become a great writer and transcend the lies that had corrupted his talent. I trust Dickey rather than the aggressive Deborah, who would naturally deny the frying pan incident. My medical dictionary gives "hiatus hernia." I don't care what degree Hart got or how long he worked on the book: the result is abysmal.

I received two other responses to my review. The poet Dana Gioia wrote: "A superb review of the Dickey biography. It's shocking how many errors Hart made in his book." And William Styron observed: "Thank you for your extremely perceptive review of the Dickey biography. You really nailed the author for some rather slipshod scholarship."

Jeffrey Meyers
Berkeley, California

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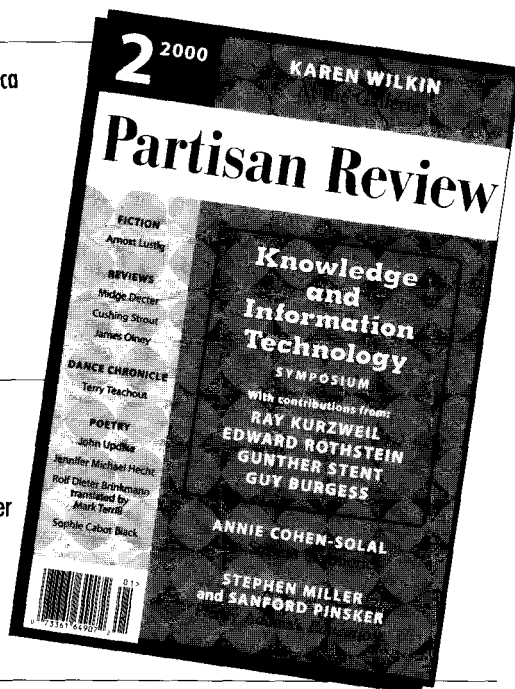
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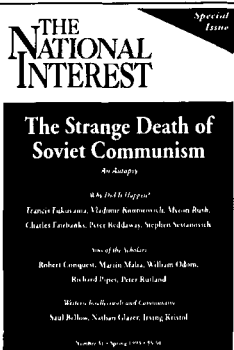
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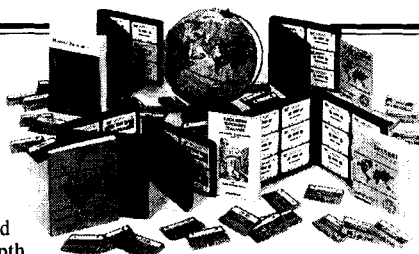
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